

The Sky In A Cage

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Category: How to Train Your Dragon, Rise of the Guardians
Genre: Angst, Tragedy
Language: English
Characters: Hiccup, Jack Frost
Status: Completed
Published: 2013-05-11 23:31:35
Updated: 2014-08-21 01:34:58
Packaged: 2016-04-26 15:04:54
Rating: M
Chapters: 3
Words: 43,087
Publisher: www.fanfiction.net
Summary: In which the Fearling Prince obtains a new plaything.
Corrupted Hijack, dark!Jack, hints of Blackice. rape/non-con,
EXPLICIT-

1. The Sky in a Cage

Note: I wanted to write a HiJack where Jack was already Pitch's Fearling Prince from the start, and...ahh, it got really dark. I kind of hate myself for writing this one u.u; If evil!Jack is not your cup of tea, this is your warning. This is an unhappy story and contains **stalking, kidnapping, rape, restraints, and possession/brainwashing. Please turn away now if any of that is triggering to you! **It's also **NC-17** so please be of age

I would also recommend being aware of book!Pitch's ability to turn children into fearlings, but it's not totally unexplained either way...

^^^^**there's your warning! **The rest of you, carry on I suppose.

EDIT: whoops, ending-spoiler-y bonus sketch at my tumblr:
chiwandering, post/50142971618/

I think that's everything

* * *

><p>-The Sky In A Cage-<p>

When Hiccup opened his eyes, there was nothing there but blackness.

This wasn't as weird as others may think, even with the benefit of knowing perfectly well that he had fallen asleep comfortably curled

under several blankets in a reasonably well-lit room. Countless times before he had woken up in a blind tangle after Toothless' needy roars had startled him into crashing out of bed, or opened his eyes to find a motherly Toothless had long since wrapped him up tight under his wings, or found Toothless blocking out the light like a great liquid shadow, or...

...well, you get the idea. When your best friend was an exceptionally powerful (and surprisingly affectionate) stealth dragon, you tended to grow accustomed to changes in living arrangement.

So Hiccup just closed his eyes again, stretched his arms out to feel for leathery, folded wings, and-

...and his arms wouldn't move. Which may not have been so strange, considering, but his legs wouldn't move either. Hiccup tried to open his mouth, tentatively call out for his friend, only to find that he...well, _couldn't_. There was a pressure sealed over his lips, non-physical but very much there. Switches were slowly clicking in his sleepy brain, pattering down one after another like the first drops of winter rain: the faint ache in his shoulder blades, as if his arms had been kept in an uncomfortable position for quite some time. The creeping feeling of hidden eyes. The silence in the air, an utter stillness that was unnatural on a wild island like Berk.

Assuming he was still _in_ Berk.

HELLO? Hiccup tried his best to shout into the darkness. What came out was a very faint, pathetic _mmmmph!_ sound that left little room to doubt that he had in fact been gagged.

So...great. Kidnapping was looking very high on the list.

At just that moment, a chilly laugh slipped through the air. Hiccup felt his heart leap into his throat as the ground beneath him suddenly rocked, swinging back and forth gently like a gigantic pendulum until his stomach and his head went all crisscrossed and dizzy and the urge to be sick hit him like a slap in the face.

"Ohhh, you're awake!" chortled the voice from somewhere close and slightly above. It was deep and joyful insane, even by a Viking's standards. "Welcome back, Hiccup~"

Aaaand it knew his name. Perfect.

"Don't be afraid. If you're really good, I'll take the blindfold off, and if you're really, _really_ good, I'll take the shadows off and I'll let you stretch your legs...uh...leg." the voice snickered somewhat, then cleared it's throat and started all over again, playfully sweet. "Before we, you know, get down to business. Doesn't that sound _fun?_"

Why do the gods hate me?, Hiccup thought darkly, but all he could manage was still something between a helpless _mmmmph!_ and a sort of whimper-y growl back in his throat that was really more embarrassing than it was threatening. The voice laughed again, delighted, and Hiccup felt the ground give another lurching rock just as it had finally begun to still.

"You don't even know who I am, do you? _Yet._" There was a chiming sound, delicate fumbling like a key twisting in a lock. A metallic creaking broke through - a door swinging open - and Hiccup tensed up as the air become notably colder. Faint padding echoed near his side, feather-light and nimble. Footsteps. "But I know who you are. You can hear me now, so I'll bet you'll be able to see me too. After all this time, you can see me..."

The voice was coming closer. Hiccup swallowed, heart racing. This wasn't good. He was all about reason and finding common ground. But bound, blinded, gagged and faced with a mentally unstable abductor...? His only hope was a bit of freedom, some way to negotiate or at least figure out where he was and who he was dealing with. Or help from Toothle-...gods, _Toothless_. Where was Toothless? He was never far behind no matter where they were - what if he was taken, too? What if he was hurt?

Worry swept over him nauseatingly as the image of the flightless dragon came to mind. But there was little time to dwell on the thought before a sharp pain flared along the back of his head, tugging: a set a bony fingers fisted in his hair. Hiccup's gasp was swallowed up by the gag, making itself known instead in the form of a visible shudder from his shoulders to buckling knees.

The darkness peeled away.

Staring wildly into his face was a pair of unnaturally bright blue eyes, wide and fractured with patterns of splintered ice. Jet black hair, highlighted with frozen winter ferns, fell over his forehead in shards. His skin was sunken, gray-white and translucent enough to show the bluish web of a circulatory system underneath. _Living people don't look like that_, Hiccup thought in horror, and shivered hard enough to rattle teeth.

He twisted his head away, and the stranger jerked him roughly back by the hair. "_Look at me_", he demanded. "Come on, _look_...you owe me that much, Hic..."

He made a flicking motion with his hand, and the shadow-pressure over his lips was gone, as suddenly and impossibly as if it had never been there at all. Hiccup gasped in shaken, hurried breaths, wide-eyed. The boy leaned in, and Hiccup automatically tilted his head back, all too aware of the naked pulse thudding in his throat. It was an automatic retort from his time with the dragons, exposing the neck submissively to better his chances of making it out of a skirmish alive. Of course, that was before befriending them - before Toothless - but growing up in deathly conditions had long since made a few unbreakable habits.

Now blue eyes were fixed hungrily open his neck, and Hiccup hissed as the hand in his hair pulled him back further, baring him like an offering. "Wait, j-just, _wait_", he babbled - another bad habit - he's long since stopped keeping count - but sometimes his brain moved too fast and his mouth didn't know how to catch up and, well. "I don't know you, I'm not - t-this is a misunderstanding so if you'd just, just let me-"

A pressure returned to his mouth, but this time it wasn't the shadow gag. Hungry, searching, the wet slide of a tongue behind his

teeth...for a moment the notion that he's being _kissed_ is so surprising and bizarre and downright ridiculous that he can't think to do anything other than sit there and gape stupidly until the boy has pulled back.

He licked his lips slowly, thoughtfully, as if analyzing some rare, particular flavor. Hiccup counted teeth, each one bone-white and subtly fanged.

"Oh," he squeaked, because..._oh_. His mouth stung in that way reminiscent of the harsh bite of winter wind, his head so empty it may as well have been stuffed full of wool. "Oh gods..."

"Yeah," the boy - creature? _God?_ - snickered smugly. "That's right. But you can call me Jack. Or _Jokul Frosti_, if you like that one better?"

"I don't underst-"

"Of course you don't! You didn't believe in me, so how _could_ you?" Jack's voice was shrill, an explosion, and Hiccup shut his eyes on the off-chance that dust and debris would follow. "But it doesn't matter - NOW you can see me. Pitch was right, fear works faster than belief. You have...haha..._no_ idea how long I've been waiting..."

I really, really don't, Hiccup agreed privately and somewhat hysterically. He tried to raise a hand to wipe at his cold mouth, but the shadow bonds barely allowed for struggling and Jack didn't seem inclined to lift them any time soon. "I kind of have a village to get to," he tried instead. It sounded just as pathetic aloud as it did in his head, but then elegance was never really his strong point. "My Dad will notice I'm gone - I, uh, I'm sort of _needed_, actually, I know I don't look it, but. But we could - talk? Like, for starters, uh - my name's Hiccup! Hiccup Horrendous Haddock the Third, but I guess maybe you already knew th-"

A freezing hand closed over his mouth. Hiccup huffed out a breath against the cold skin.

Alright. So maybe talking wasn't the best way to go about this after all. Noted.

Jack leaned in close. Blue, blue eyes were all he could see. He recalled the current of icy rivers, fish scales, gleaming wet paint on a bloodstained shield. There was something pretty buried deep underneath those eyes, but on the surface it looked remodeled and fake. Haunting. "You're not going anywhere," Jack said, digging his nails into Hiccup's cheek, and Hiccup tried to shout back at him but the muffled drum of his protests only sounded helpless, wounding pride and deepening the corners of Jack's grin.

So he quieted himself instead. Jack nodded, peeled his hand away, but the pressure stayed, that same layer of shadow sealed over again. Tendrils of darkness twitched and jumped when he moved, rising to his feet to observe his captive. From this angle, Hiccup could see more of his surroundings - slate stone and sinking stairs, rusted metal and heaps of blackness that twitched and moved like living things. He understood now why the floor was rocking so much before: he was in a _cage_. There were thousands of them, ornate and hollow, hanging from

the ceiling like a twisted showcase.

Yeah, no. Definitely not in Berk anymore.

"I've been watching you for a long time," Jack confessed, pacing the small area of the cage. Hiccup tried to shake his head, connect their eyes, _anything_, but there was a barrier there that just wouldn't fall away. "You were so lonely! Nobody wanted anything to do with you. Even your Dad didn't want you..." He tapped his chin, correcting: "_Doesn't_ want you. The only reason they bother with you now is because you learned a few tricks. You can't see that - you're too won over. But I can see it. _They_ don't know what it's like to be alone. _We_ do."

He turned, opening his palms like an offering, and the shadows around them bent and wavered. Was he imagining it, or were there eyes in that darkness? Distant, yellow, lamplit eyes..? "I wanted to be your _friend_. But you didn't believe in me. You never saw me. I kissed your nose, you know? I painted frost on your shield. I made paths for you in the ice. I sat by your bed, and you'd wake up shivering, but you never saw me..."

Hiccup stared, losing the beat of his words beneath the beating of his own heart. When did breathing become such a difficult task?

"...remember when you were six, how there was that storm after your mom died? You used to dig tunnels under all the snow, and one day everything collapsed on you. You were so scared, you just curled up and waited to die. And wouldn't you know it, I carried you back out. _Me!_ You didn't even say thank you."

That's..._that's..._

There's ways he could have known that. There's ways around this, there has to be. It's like a joke with the punchline hovering out of reach, and Hiccup was just _waiting_ for it, trying not to just lose his cool and panic because being told you have a supernatural stalker is just - it's..._how?_ How could that be? Unless Jack really was a god? Unless fate wasn't quite ready to let him go?

Maybe - maybe this was all a dream, a very strange dream, and Toothless was curled up on the roof pawing at the tiles and whining for him to wake up and fit into that empty spot between his wings. And any second now he was going to wake, and...

Jack knelt down. Grasped at his vest. The shadows melted and twisted to allow his movements, and Hiccup tried to scream into the shadow gag but he may as well have been trying to _will_ himself free for all the good it did. Jack pushed the fur back into a tangle around his arms. Hiked the green tunic up over his ribs.

This isn't real. Hiccup jumped when cold fingers splayed over his naked belly. Shivers blossomed like ripples on water. Jack made a low noise, pleased and curious. _Of all the- this can't be real..._

Somewhere in the distance, a low, silky voice laughed out calmly.
"Jack."

Two gold eyes blinked open in the darkness beyond them.

No, he thought with dawning horror. _No, no, no._ Wasn't one _enough?_ But the man who stepped out of the shadows was different from Jack - older, more refined. His narrow face was all flat lines and angles, a pointed chin and a wide carnivore mouth. Shrouded in an inky cloak, it seemed impossible to tell just where the gray skin ended and the shadows began. He moved on the air as if gliding, hovering just outside the rusted bars of Hiccup's cage.

Their eyes met, forest green to glassy gold...and suddenly he was a thousand miles up in smokey, stormy air, pressed against Toothless' back and blinking through the fire, the rumbling screams of the Red Death surrounding him from all sides until he was weightless, falling, falling, _falling_.

"'bout time you're back." Jack said gleefully, and the fearful spell broke as the man's golden gaze tore itself from him. Jack's touches went still, pausing as he turned to eye the other: there was adoration in his gaze, raw and twisted. "So, did you get the dragon?"

Toothless. Hiccup's heart all but stopped in his chest.

"Now, now, my Fearling Prince" the man said, shaking his head in a fond, chiding sort of way. "I said you could have _**a*_ toy, not two."

"But this one comes in a set! If you separate them, he'll just break. I don't want him broken, I want him _moving_..."

"'I want, I want'..." the man repeated, bending to step into the spacious cage. "Must you be so ungrateful?"

"Come onnn, Pitch! It's a _dragon_. Can you imagine a Night Fury Fearling, all spitting fireballs and blotting out the sun, it would be so _cool_-"

"Mmm." said Pitch, only half listening. Those yellow eyes fixed on Hiccup again, and the shaken Viking quickly picked a spot at his collar to stare at instead. He had learned a lot about give and take from the dragons - Toothless was a prime example: fierce and deadly at the drop of a coin, it had taken patience and trust and a certain suicidal love to expose his softer side. But it was _there_, and once he had found it he learned how to navigate it, figure out what Toothless liked and what made him angry. Now that dragon's heart was his home. He lived there, breathed there, felt _safest_ there. Other dragons were deathly, but they had their soft spots too. Some were tougher to reach than others: a Terror only needed a bit of fish after a long day, while a Nightmare he needed to look in the eyes, give that pound of respect and leave himself open if he ever hoped to develop trust.

He thought maybe they were all like that - secret, misunderstood. But then he saw the Hive Queen, the Red Death - and by proxy, the crazed, hypnotic look in the dragon's eyes as it's buzzing song rattled bones - and there was no forgetting that. There was no reasoning with the abomination, no meeting of eyes and opening of hands. He had explained to his tribe that dragons were a lot like people: many-sided, complicated and vastly changing, but what he didn't say

was that some people were also too evil to reach, too far gone and corrupted. Some people were more Hive Queen than human, pulling strings and sucking out souls until the only bit of heart left in them was rotted to nothing.

It only took a moment of looking into Pitch's eyes to recognize that there was nothing human left. He was a Red Death, and Jack was nothing more than a worker dragon, hypnotized by a buzzing song. It didn't surprise him to see his shoulders slump as Pitch approached, the lines of his face smoothing into something open and adoring and disturbingly submissive.

Gods, how he wanted Toothless to be here. He wouldn't be afraid if Toothless was here. But at the same time, by the snippets of their words, maybe it would be best if he stayed safe and missing. Hiccup tried not to feel the eyes on him, the exposed skin over his stomach and chest that Jack had bared earlier. He watched the two uneasily as a long-fingered hand threaded through the fearling's frosted black hair, naturally possessive. Jack leaned into the touch unconsciously.

"You won't break this one, will you?" Pitch said, looking at Hiccup with polite interest. He may as well have been an item on a shelf.

"Not a chance. If you get that dragon then he'll last a million years, promise." Pitch scowled at that, combing through the inky locks idly. Jack's white smile curled like ribbon. "Hey, so - can I try him out now? Pleeese?"

"It would seem you've already started." Jack smirked and nuzzled his wrist apologetically. Kissed the spot where a pulse would be. Hiccup had never seen affection like this in Berk, where punches followed kisses and kisses themselves tended to bruise, but he knew enough of human nature to understand there was nothing genuine about what he was witnessing. "He is yours. Do what you want with him," Pitch decided at last, already turning away. "It makes no difference to me."

He stepped from the cage, mid-air for a fraction of a second, and then he dropped and the shadows swallowed him up, swiftly and silently. Fearling eyes bubbled and multiplied in the darkness, pressing in to fill his absence.

Jack cackled. "We're gonna have fun," he promised, and without further adieu he swooped down and kissed him again, not bothering to remove the shadow gag. Hiccup tasted darkness, ozone and melting ice while nimble hands rushed to untie his pants. The shadows around his ankles and knees melted away to accommodate, settling over his limbs in a way that felt unnatural and heavy. Jack hooked his thumbs beneath the material and pulled down, down, nudging his legs open as Hiccup tried to press his knees together, mortified.

He had never been naked with another person...if Jack could even be considered a person at all. Hiccup counted to three, slowly, before what calm was left shattered and he threw the little strength he had into struggling.

As predicted, the shadow bonds squeezed tight. He barely moved an inch except to tire himself out. Jack shushed him sweetly, fitted

himself to Hiccup's side. "That _fear_..." he breathed, and his voice sounded low, primal and new. "I wish you knew, Hiccup, when you get really scared, it's the prettiest thing. Your eyes go as big as the moon and you tremble all over 'till it reaches your toes, and you make this moaning noise way back in your throat like you're being strangled..."

Chilly fingers danced over his collar at the suggestion. Hiccup could feel him pressed against his thigh, just sort of..._rubbing_, shadow and cloth and flesh underneath. His thoughts become muddled and gauzy, a litany of _no, no, no..._

"I'm going to take the gag off, okay?" Jack hummed, and a moment later the pressure over his mouth was gone. He gasped in air, blinking, and Jack shivered with pleasure at the torrents of fear. His lips parted slightly, as if it were a tangible flavor upon the air, and Hiccup's mind raced for the right words, knowing he may only be able to fit in a choice few.

But what he should he _do?_ Was it better to scream or play dead in the dragon's nest? Without Toothless to fly him out, he was just going to get eaten either way, wasn't he?

What happened to 'stubbornness issues?'_

Oh, right. Send them running. Because the old Viking standard had always worked wonders before. He nearly rolled his eyes at the dry reminder. Jack didn't notice; he was too busy pressing his thumb into the soft hollow at the back of Hiccup's knee. The Fearling boy sighed in anticipation, inspecting his prosthetic foot curiously before coming to some secret conclusion and hiking the same leg up over his shoulder. Hiccup opened his mouth, managed a sound that bordered dangerously close to a sob, and snapped it closed again. His face was terribly hot, lit as if by burning coals. "J-Jack, listen to me - you need to ****stop****. I'm serious, you don't want to-"

"Ssh." Jack leaned in, nuzzling his belly while Hiccup tried weakly to close his legs. Goosebumps prickled over his skin, raising the fine hairs on the back of his neck and tickling through his scalp. His skin felt warmer now, less icy and more winter-cool, but he couldn't hold in his surprised "_ah!_" when a damp tongue painted a stripe down from his ribs to his navel.

"Make that sound again," Jack demanded, his eyes round and eager, and then he ducked down until Hiccup could only see the inky mess of hair and the bony outline of his shoulders. A hand curled over him shamelessly, and then - then Jack bent down and _licked_ until a spike of pleasure broke through the horror and he cried out, arching. His captor bent double, teased with practiced flicks of his tongue, and Hiccup squeezed his eyes shut, tried to take that bit of traitorous pleasure and hammer it back into logic and control.

The fingers locked around his hips slid lower, one hand holding him in place, the other teasing and pushing right where it shouldn't. Hiccup may have been young and admittedly naive to a point, but he was far from stupid. He saw where this was going. What Jack was doing to him, between the warm wetness of a dark mouth on his cock and the pressure of shadows tugging him still and pliant, slick fingers rubbing circles on sensitive skin. He tried to block it out, to remember how to speak and reason and negotiate (because that's his

strong point, his brain, his _heart_), but at that moment Jack pressed inside him with one finger, then two, and he couldn't scream, couldn't wipe away the wet tracks that had appeared on his cheeks, couldn't even remember how to breathe.

"Don't," he rasped, and his voice sounded cracked and watery and nothing at all like the Hiccup he knew. "Jack..._don't_..."

"You'll like it," he assured kindly, and curled his fingers for emphasis. Hiccup's world went white, and Jack was chortling when he blinked back to earth, tenderly kissing his cheek, his lips. And he...he just...

Okay.

Okay.

He could do this. He could...could get through this. He's a Viking, he's been raised in a village on fire, made himself vulnerable before teeth and claws and axes alike. He's free-fallen from a hundred miles in the air and landed on black scales and leathery wings. He's _killed the Red Death_, the greatest fear of dragons and humans alike.

Although he's never - he's only ever kissed Astrid, only ever had private thoughts: vague, uncertain, sweltering sort of thoughts that tended to bury themselves rather nauseatingly under reminders of _too thin_ and _too ugly_ and _disappointing_, always so disappointing.._

He had never even thought of _this._

Slow, possessive. A mouth sucking bruises in his throat, shadow-cloth friction of a body working between his legs. The pleasure-pain of fingers on him, _in_ him, fucking him like a toy, like the tears (_because who was he kidding, they were tears_) didn't even matter. But no - no - he killed the Red Death, he survived that battle. He could survive this one.

"You ready?" the Fearling Prince purred, removing his fingers, and Hiccup sucked in a shaky breath and didn't answer. He heard a tongue clicking in annoyance, followed by a sigh. "Hey, it's okay...everything's gonna be alright. Believe me, Hic, you'll like it by the end."

Gods...

The shadow gag had vanished, so Hiccup gritted his teeth to accommodate. Struggling got him nowhere. Begging got him nowhere. He set his jaw, stubborn where he could control it, because if there was one thing he could take from this he could at least not give them the pleasure of hearing him break.

Jack eased out from underneath his leg, set it back on the cage floor gently. Pale hands grasped around his waist, lifting, and with the help of the living shadows he maneuvered Hiccup up and over and down until he seated neatly in Jack's lap. The shadows on him had melted away quite easily, almost as an afterthought, but unlike Hiccup Jack regarded his own nudity with a complete lack of self-consciousness. His smile was confident, mischievous, one hand wound around his

captive to grasp at his own cock, guiding.

The shadows relaxed somewhat, giving him enough control to hold himself up with some of his own strength. Hiccup tried to lift his arms and found the shadows gently leading, allowing him enough leeway to brace himself against Jack's shoulders.

"That's it," he sighed contently, lining himself up. And then his hands urged down, and the shadows urged down, and Hiccup gasped, winced, tried to turn his head away at the blunt intrusion. Cold fingers smoothed over his skin, whispering words of encouragement.

You've been through worse, you know you have...

He shut his eyes, trying to swallow any sound, but it was impossible to erase the awful keening that escaped him as he sank down slow, inch by inch, a burning stretch that coiled fire in his belly until Jack was fully sheathed inside him and Hiccup was gasping for air, tears rolling heavy down his cheeks.

He felt stuffed full, raw and aching, and though he had felt worse pain (his leg was a perfect example, though the memory of burns and open wounds from dragon attacks were enough on their own,) it was nothing so terribly invasive, so utterly violating as this.

"There," Jack breathed out, his voice hazy and low from pleasure. "That's good." he steadied one hand on Hiccup's bare hip, stroking. The other combed bangs back from his temple, chilling the sweat there in the process. "Wow, you...you feel great."

_Odin's beard, if he would just- Stop. __**Talking.**_

Jack shifted, rocked up in to him a little, not quite a thrust but enough for Hiccup to dig his fingers in and choke back a sob. "You don't understand yet," he murmured, pressing a kiss to one freckled shoulder. "But you will. I'm saving you. I _love_ you."

This isn't love, thought Hiccup savagely, burning from the inside out. _This is ownership._

He had been blocking out the world, his brain zeroing in on just the two of them, only he should have known better than to assume they were alone. Mingled with their strained breaths, a cruel laugh melted out of the shadows behind him, "Enjoying yourself?"

The hand on his hip tightened. Hiccup moaned in protest, shuddering anew, his shoulders hitching with the force of it. Just when he thought it couldn't get worse, Jack's master was back. _Go away_, he thought desperately, face scarlet. _Please, please, please just go away._

With a few pacing steps, the Nightmare King came into view, looking slightly tired but decidedly bored with his company. And for Thors sake, Jack wouldn't stop _moving_, rutting into him almost thoughtlessly and drinking up the spilled _nngh_'s and _ahh_'s with his open mouth. It was perverse. It was _humiliating_. And he knew better than to expect the shadow man to have pity, but for a split second his eyes found Hiccup's again and a wicked smile stretched across his face like a scythe...

"My, you were correct after all, weren't you? The poor thing looks ready to shatter."

"Told you..._fuck_, he's really tight..."

Pitch tsk'd mockingly, canting his head at the sight before him. "But so very still. How very disappointing. Come now, child, you can do better than _that_."

Stop talking, Hiccup thought desperately, _STOP TALKING_. There was a fire in his chest, burning up to the back of his eyes. He was only vaguely aware of his hands struggling to clench into fists, or the growl that had lodged itself wildly in the back of his throat.

Pitch lofted a brow at him coldly. Considering. He raised a slender hand and extended it palm down, stretching his fingers out over Jack's shoulder and directly over Hiccup's heart.

"It's time, I think." he intoned calmly. "My little fearling."

And before Hiccup could even attempt to laugh at the gesture (because really, what _now_? What else could they possibly do that they hadn't already?) Pitch's fingers lay flat against his chest, pressing, but instead of meeting resistance they forced themselves _through_—

And all at once the young Viking's world went completely black.

There was no Jack. No Pitch. No blinking fearling eyes and hanging cages. There was only pain - explosive, all-consuming agony that cut through his blood and marrow and into the very core of his being where Pitch's dark fingers curled tight around his center...

...and _pulled._

Hiccup screamed. And screamed, and screamed. He was being vivisected, ripped open and consumed. Darkness poured into the negative spaces, rushing in like the tide and filling the gaping wound at his core. Shadow hands pressed into his mouth, his lungs, grasped handfuls of light and sky-bleached dreams and ripped them out, snapping cords of hope and joy like fragile, well-worn threads.

There were no words to describe that agony. It was a pain like he had never known, never even dreamed of. Faces flashed before his eyes like brittle sunbeams, each one twisting into something shadow-strewn and ugly - his father, his friends, Astrid's glowing grin - and finally, Toothless. His dragon, his best friend...wonderful, loyal, Toothless...

And once again, Hiccup was falling from the sky. The dragon's inky shape dove through the haze and hurtled after him, but this time he knew it was too late. The Night Fury was a speck of dark wings in the distance. Hiccup was seconds from the ground.

Terror bubbled up around him like thick, fresh smoke. Nightmare eyes blinking from above and below, peeking out through the curtains of flame and shrieking wind. They smiled at him, cawed hungrily for blood, for fear - and Odin help him, there was _so_ much.

FEAR—

Toothless, Hiccup screamed, _TOOTHLESS, __**CATCH ME-**_

And then came the impact.

* * *

><p>"Oh FUCK-," Jack bit out, curling his fingers in to graying flesh. Hiccup was like a vice upon him as he convulsed through Pitch's forced transformation, and Jack could do little but gasp and grind through the deplorable squeeze. The Nightmare King lingered for a moment, frowning, removing his hand from the slowly darkening body almost as an afterthought. Then, with a tolerant smile, he vanished neatly into shadow.

Hiccup had gone mostly still, twitching faintly as the darkness worked through the finer, more delicate pathways within his center. He was beautiful in black, with a well of tossed hair like spilled ink and stone-gray skin still peppered with freckles. He blinked vacantly as consciousness slowly returned, and Jack could only just see the stark, unnatural glow of acid green eyes peeking out from under fluttering lashes.

He dragged his hands up the thin torso, steadying him. The newborn fearling stirred in response, back arching, winding his lean legs tightly around Jack's waist. He had known him to be scrawny before, all bony joints and ribs prominent enough to count, but he had never realized how _small_ Hiccup was until they were intertwined. The way he fit into the winter sprite's shadow, it was as if he was born to reside there.

He was, Jack knew, kissing that warm, unresponsive mouth lovingly. _Just like me with Pitch_. And though a warm, safe glow settled around him at the thought of being similarly saved, a lost fragment of him ached unexpectedly.

It was his secret, an annoyance that broke through the lovely fear: that sometimes a different sort of consciousness lingered at the surface of his darkling mind, a broken soul victimized but not quite fully stamped out yet. _This isn't love_, screamed that voice, raw and broken like spider-web shards of ice over a forgotten lake. _This is ownership._

He didn't know the difference anymore.

* * *

><p>Hiccup woke to a world tinted gray.<p>

Fearlings. Nightmares. Yellow eyes, steady and curious. A pressure on his skin, the pads of chilly fingers, a cool tongue tracing loose snowflake patterns over his chest. He felt numb, thoroughly drugged, as if everything here was happening to someone else and he was only watching, floating above it all like an astral projection.

He spared a moment to examine his hands (silvery-pale, thin but calloused from work), counted the knuckles and tucked them away against the winter-bright body beneath him. Blue eyes and an icy smile (_Jack_, his mind supplied). He was aware that he was moving, or more accurately, Jack was moving _him_, fucking him gently from

beneath the weight of his sleepy body.

Everything else beyond their names - it all seemed foggy. Unimportant.

But there was pleasure too - that seemed important, persistent and sweet though strangely foreign in his battered state. Hiccup curled his fingers experimentally, braced himself over Jack's shoulders until the fearling's leaking cock was almost entirely out of him. Oh, whispered a voice in his head drunkenly as the slide made him gasp aloud. That's - that's nice. He hovered for a moment, chewing his lip, then sunk down and cried out, lifted and fell again and again, trembling and moaning because he knew how to do nothing else.

Jack's hissed something, tilted his head back as if in pain, but Hiccup barely noticed in his frenzy of movement. Something clicked inside him, a spot he hadn't even been aware to aim for, and

-

"NNnnngh!"

He wanted more. Needed more. It was a primal hunger and it wasn't even his own but the black tar of his heart was singing in completion and he was unable to refuse. His superior (owner! his mind corrected) moaned against his open mouth, nibbled at his lower lip as Hiccup rocked against him eagerly, setting a pace that was fast and bruising. The bonds (shadows) were all gone now, and Hiccup nearly cried for joy at the realization because that meant he could (finally) get leverage. Suddenly there seemed to be nothing more important than moving, working Jack faster and deeper inside himself.

"That's it Hic," Jack stroked his face, his belly, curled a hand around his cock. It was cold and perfect, pleasure-tinged pain, and Hiccup cried out and arched against him at the duel sensations. He was close to - to something - but whatever it was, Jack was close too. He could feel it building within them like a tsunami, coiling hot and tense beneath his skin until Jack's fingers finally locked around his wrist and Jack's teeth scraped over his throat and Hiccup could do nothing but sob and come undone in his hands.

He collapsed against him heavily, panting, and not long after Jack bit down hard enough to break skin and went tense as well. There was an odd, liquid coldness within him, and Hiccup squirmed at the sensation, toes curling, scrunching his face up against Jack's bare shoulder.

He felt kisses in the afterglow, a rain of them pressing down upon his forehead and his nose and the little creases along his palms. Curiously enough, there was a wetness on his face, moisture dripping from his eyes and pooling thickly at his chin. For the life of him he couldn't quite remember why that was.

"I told you you'd like it," Jack said, wiping away the moisture with the back of his hand. The words didn't quite make sense to him, but the tone was graciously approving and Hiccup couldn't resist the compulsion to nod. "Didn't I?"

"You-" he began, and immediately stopped. Beyond the gasping and

moaning, the sound of his own voice startled him inexplicably.
"...yeah." he managed finally. "You did."

Liquid droplets blurred his eyes again. Strange.

But not important.

Hiccup curled himself within the safety of his master's arms and waited for them to subside.

2. The Canary

I posted this as a separate story on ao3 but I think here I'll just make it another chapter. If you want to check my posts there my penname is Gabri :,)

taking place directly after the sky in a cage. Despite there being more planned in this universe I wouldn't expect another update for a while, I'm a slow writer and this story in particular I take extra care with.

same warnings as before. please don't read if you're easily triggered. this has a veryyyy unreliable narrator

* * *

><p>"the canary"

* * *

><p>He usually fell asleep after Jack was finished. It had become a habit, spurred on by the soothing sounds of praise and the rhythmic lull of fingers through his hair. He had never payed much attention to the part where Jack untangled their limbs and padded barefoot to lock the cage closed behind him until the day finally came that Hiccup opened his eyes to find the door still swinging open on it's hinges.<p>

He had always known his world to be such a tiny thing. Ten paces would be enough to cross the entire distance of the steel beneath his feet. It was enough to stretch himself fully across without touching either side. Enough to roll over without bumping knees or elbows.

More than enough to be comfortable.

And he was comfortable. Hiccup couldn't imagine being more content, although there was a certain aimlessness when his master was not around that made his brain feel terribly empty, as shapeless and swirling as the fearlings whispering beneath his ankles. He watched them as he was, swinging his legs vacantly through the gap left by the open door and into the wash of stone-broken blackness stretched out below. The dark was so perfect his pale gray legs seemed unnaturally stark-bright against it; one bare foot peppered in freckles, the other gone entirely. A metal stub. It interested him in the way that the sinking ruins interested him, or anything that wasn't Jack interested him - which was to say just another thing to train his eyes on for lack of a better subject.

It shouldn't have made a difference, that metal foot; it wasn't particularly better or worse than the flesh one. But his eyes went to it automatically as he dangled his legs off the mouth of the cage, and in the spaces between Jack's visits he began to know every subtle scratch upon the surface almost as well as he knew the tiny creases inside his master's palms.

There were Nightmare's screaming in the distance. Commonplace, but still startlingly loud. Hiccup lifted his head as they passed, an entire horde of them. A few stopped to sniff at his cage or nudge at his feet, circling, before charging onward in a rush. Their scent was fuller than before - more satisfied than their usual greedy aura of returning home from a meal.

The echo of approaching laughter was more satisfied, too.

Hiccup folded his legs back through the door and pushed himself upright, gripping at the bars for support. The deep, manic rumble grew closer by the second. He usually had more time than this before the Prince was upon him - Jack was quick, but tonight he was like lightening, zipping through the ruins in a blue-black blur. There was a drum in Hiccup's chest, a wasp's nest buzzing to life between his ribs as the distance between them decreased.

"You're-you're _home-_" he stammered out as the voice's owner perched, grinning, outside of his cage. The joyful cackling came with a charge, and already he could feel the aimlessness in his brain lifting. His own greeting sounded small, distant. Even Jack couldn't seem to hear him. It figured, Hiccup could barely hear _himself._

And something was...different.

Not wrong, but _different._ Bigger. _Powerful._ Something had happened and it was hanging in their air, a lingering scent of rare and valuable fear that surged through the Fearling Prince like a shockwave.

Jack pushed himself through the open door, vibrant with glee and perfectly unbothered by the violent lurching of floor beneath him. Hiccup stumbled for him - he couldn't even manage a tenth of Jack's natural aerial grace - and in a heartbeat the Prince had him upright, gripping at his upper arms so tightly that his thumb and forefinger nearly touched.

"-she _saw_ me!" he babbled excitedly, and Hiccup sucked in a trembling breath. The air was thick with adrenaline, the high of dominance and freshly fed monsters, but with Jack mere inches from him the intensity of that power was all the stronger. He was all but bursting with it, hardly able to keep himself still. "My shadow, too! I got up behind her first, and she sees the shadow of my hand creeping up the wall..." His fingers tapped like spider-legs in giddy demonstration. "...you should have _seen_ her!"

He was already half-hard. Hiccup could see that much. He reached on instinct, flattening a hand over Jack's belly, letting the waves of his master's victory roll over him like a drug. "You should have seen her face when she woke up...!" he continued with feverish hunger, unmoving except to stroke the pad of one thumb over Hiccup's arm in slow, tight circles. "You would have _loved_ it, it was so awesome -

you should have heard her scream when I said your name-

"I'm listening..." Hiccup tried pleadingly.

"Well, she's not here now." Jack laughed affectionately, chiding. "She's up there with the rest of them. You know, above."

"Above..." He repeated it wonderingly, for lack of anything else to say. It was just a word, meaningless, but it meant something to Jack and that something was powerful and grand. He had seen Jack in pleasure a thousand times before, but never quite like this. It was a fog that filled his brain, blurring out everything else beyond their contact as Jack cocked his head, maddeningly casual but rapt with interest. Watching.

"Pitch says maybe someday you can come with us." he suggested as Hiccup buried his face in the hollow of his throat, nuzzling the place where his pulse always thudded a beat too slow. He could almost taste the blood underneath, cold and berry blue, straining in his throat and chest and flush against his bare palm. "That's a big 'maybe' for him, though. Maybe if you're extra good. You can be good, right Hic?"

He chuckled quietly when Hiccup gave a throaty moan in response.

"Boy, you really want it, don't you..."

"_Yes_." Hiccup whined, because Jack wanted it, he could feel it. This was the only thing that made sense, the only thing that felt important and not just blurry and distant and blank. He knew how to do this. He was wired for this. For him. "Jack..."

Jack laughed again, delighted, the sound of it crackling like electricity over his skin. "What do we say, sweetheart?"

"_Please...just, can you just...?"

"That's it~! That's a good boy."

He kissed his forehead first, adoring. The shadows were melting off him at will and Hiccup surged in immediately, near trembling in his need. He fumbled to his knees the moment the grip let up, barely registering the impact of the floor against his legs in his haste to reach his goal. Jack slid a hand in his hair and for one lovely moment Hiccup allowed to himself reveal in the praising note of his touch before the fingers fisted tight and jerked his head back sharply.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa-!" He scolded, "Slow down, none of that now. Nothing in your mouth, come on. I wanna hear you."

"Yes-" Hiccup heard himself stammer back, automatic and eager, yes, yes, yes, and when Jack pushed him flat on his back a moment later he obediently refrained from biting down on the gasp that rose into his throat. He could feel the weight of him like a blanket, the icy fingers that held his hips firmly in place as Hiccup tried to surge forward, press himself into all the negative spaces. He felt like a puzzle piece, a tiny fragment removed from a greater picture, and the

need to see what their colors created when finally combined was so strong it was enough to drive him mad.

Hands on his thighs, stroking. Spreading him open. His own voice in the air, swelling and catching and utterly naked. Everything clicked into place when Jack forced himself inside, as easily as if he had never left, and Hiccup's tiny world of black bars and gray sky and ten paces of steel beneath his feet zeroed down to nothing except the places where his owner's skin burned white-hot against his own.

This part came so _naturally._ The thoughtlessness of rolling his hips forward, scraping his fingers over freezing shoulders and letting every tangled moan fill up the gaps between the bars. It was like being rewritten with Jack inside him, as if he could finally understand how alone he was an only empty book, bones on paper, and the chilly breath on his neck and the scraping of nails over his sides was like the comfort of words filling him up again.

Jack breathed frigid air against his pulse, pausing in his movements long enough to splay his hand over Hiccup's chest, directly over the rapid beating within. His bare palm blazed, a sensation sinking through his skin until Hiccup could almost picture the white-gray fingers curling snug around his heart.

He kept his mouth open, gasping and gagging on the moans that spilled out one right after the other. And it wasn't enough, not nearly, but Jack seemed to know what what was missing.

"_Scream._" he ordered hungrily.

So Hiccup drew in a breath to scream.

It couldn't have been any imitation of what they had heard before - the noise from those 'above' places, the sounds that Jack swore they could draw from the sleeping. This was a purely pleased thing, broken and punctured by wet thrusts, unhinged by instruction. It urged on their coupling, magnified a thousand times over in the stillness of underground as Jack's hands crawled over his ribs, his chest, settling heavy over his throat and forming a collar there with his fingers.

It was bliss, being so thoroughly owned, even when the circle of his hands locked in tight and then tighter. Even as black spots began to form before his eyes. Even as, from a thousand miles away, Hiccup heard the sounds of his own screaming become harsh and strangled.

"-_louder_-"

Yes - Hiccup thought helplessly. _Yes, okay -_

His thrusts were becoming sloppy and shallow, only Hiccup couldn't meet them anymore. His body wasn't listening despite the beat of _yes_ and _more_ and _please_ pulsing through his brain like a second heartbeat. There was a fire in his lungs, consuming, a desperation washed over the natural high of his master's attentions - because he knew what he had to do but at the same time he _couldn't_ - Jack was squeezing and he _couldn't_-

-and then his fingers eased up and he was coughing, shuddering

through ragged breaths before managing enough oxygen to cough all over again. Jack collected him carefully, gathering him up into his arms. He was freezing to touch, more so than Hiccup had come to expect, and the contact of new skin sent a shock through him as he took in their new position - he hadn't even realized it was over until it was _over._

He hadn't...

The shame that washed over him was something akin to fear. They were separated again, come cooling on his thighs, but he hadn't even _realized..._

He couldn't say sorry. Jack was shushing him, which was an order in it's own right: no more noise. So Hiccup lay still, trembling uncontrollably, taking meticulous note of the fresh aching renewed in his body. It was different this time: sharper. Fire in his lungs. A ring of it around his throat. This was new, almost alarming... Jack had never brought fire with his touches before.

"You did good," he whispered, and the fear quickly melted into relief. There were hands in his hair, stroking and petting as if he were a child. "_So_ good. Thank you..." Kisses. Hiccup soaked them up like sunrays, pressing his face into Jack's collar where his heartbeat thrummed in quickening chords. "Did you like it too?"

Gods, yes, Hiccup thought wildly. _I loved it. I love you._ There was so much more to confess, an entire novel carved fresh into his skin, but his throat couldn't form the words. Jack didn't seem dissatisfied with his inability to answer. He pressed his lips to his forehead, then his cheek, and finally to the foreign ache burning at his throat.

Hiccup stared contently at the darkness beyond them.

It was so _quiet._ He usually drifted off in the afterglow, just listening to their heartbeats, but sleep wouldn't come now. He could hear Jack's murmurs, throaty sounds, so different from the bell of his laughter. He could hear the ugly rasp of his own voice, uneven and gasping, pausing now and again to be swallowed up by Jack's chilly lips.

There was dust in his hair, or dirt. That was new, too.

Strange, but not important.
>Tiny raindrops of debris filtering outside his cage. So strange...<p>

A distant rumble from above...

Above.

"Oh...!" Hiccup heard himself say. Just like that - _oh!_ - as if he were a spectator at a show and that distant rumble was a stage trick, a tip of the hat for his ears alone. It sounded all wrong, too loud against Jack's whispering, but the power behind it was of a different sort. It was getting getting louder as the seconds passed, stronger, broken in places as if the sound's conductor was losing it's patience.

but not important, Hiccup thought automatically. And of course that was true - Jack's mouth was on his throat; _that_ was something of real importance. One hand was curled at his waist. The other on his thigh. And it was perfect, really - he wanted nothing more than to stay tucked into that embrace forever.

The rumbling picked up. It shook the ceiling once, dislodging more loose earth.

An inexplicable shudder passed through Hiccup's body as he felt himself, dreamlike, pushing upwards to stand on mismatched feet. The movements were stiff, unnatural, as if fighting invisible puppet string or limbs weighed with invisible stones.

...he had never _done_ this before.

It was always Jack that untangled their bodies. It was Hiccup's place to cling, to burrow, to fall asleep there and drink up every lovely moment that they remained entwined. But for some reason he was (_sit down...!_) standing, uncurling himself from the cold net of arms. And then he was walking (_stop-!_), lopsided and clumsy, the metal stub of a leg sounding with an uneven clatter-

-that rumble was so strong, so _familiar_-

"Hiccup-?!"

Jack was halfway to his feet, and Hiccup was halfway to the door.

And before he could even register Jack's order of '_wait-!_', he was falling.

There was fire all around him. Or maybe there wasn't, maybe it was all inside of him. Maybe he had already hit the ground and this was just all that heat that Jack had pressed inside of him spilling out through the cracks. The only real disconnection he felt was the sharp lurch at the mouth of the cage as his weight tipped the balance, a sound of rusted metal as the fixture creaked on it's rusted chain - but then it was far behind him and there was only wind rushing past his ears and fearling eyes blinking through and the sound of his own hummingbird heartbeat magnified a thousand times over.

Catch me, Hiccup thought randomly. It seemed to pop up into his head like a frozen speech bubble, tiny and clear as glass, until the roar of the wind and the hissing scream of nightmare men snatched it away again.

A hand snagged around his shoulders. Another around his knees. The first impact was muted, a collision of dead weight against airborne energy as Jack intercepted him mid-air, followed by the shock of his feet slamming their combined weight against the stone ground. Jack was saying something - screaming it, really - but at that moment the sounds from above picked up with another lurching rumble and all Hiccup could hear was the fire in his own brain.

He didn't _understand. _

He had hit the ground...there was a _memory_ of hitting the

ground...

He knew he did...

...but he didn't, of course - he didn't. Jack was holding him, and he was in one piece, unharmed, totally and completely safe...

...nobody had caught him-

(not important, the voice in his head corrected-)

-but there had been an impact. Not just the sudden shock of Jack's feet absorbing the fall for him but a real impact.

The kind you don't live through.

More screaming. Someone else's, layering itself over Jack's climbing voice. He thought he could hear the distant rumble from above reacting to it, multiplying in power - but then there was a hand over his mouth and when it pulled away there darkness pressed there instead, filling him up and silencing the sound. The fire in his chest and throat was indescribable, welling up wildly behind his closed lips. With no where else to go it tore at his insides, underneath his skin, desperate to find a new escape.

Hands on his face. It had to be Jack's hands, he'd know them anywhere, but the gray-skinned blob of a person he was staring back at had gone far too blurry to tell. There was liquid on his cheeks and the hands were scrubbing at them, over and over as they reappeared fresh.

He had seen Jack in a panic before, but never like this.

The gag wouldn't let him apologize. Hiccup tried to make contact with his eyes, but they were leaking too much to do any good. Soon enough, Jack had sealed darkness over them, too.

He was aware of a whispering, far away and sinister, like another creature's lullaby. A quietness settling back in his brain, buzzing, the drone of a far-away power singing him to sleep.

More than anything else, he was aware of the weight of someone holding him.

* * *

><p>When Hiccup opened his eyes, there was nothing there but blackness.<p>

It didn't seem strange, at first. Countless times he had woken up blind, cloaked heavily in darkness, or found Jack pressed so impossibly close that his shape blurred out the world like a liquid shadow.

So Hiccup just closed his eyes again, peacefully and without question. He could wait here for hours. He had before. There was plenty to keep him happy, after all. Noises upon the air, faint and almost domestic in their familiarity. A brittleness, like clicking teeth. The hollow whispering that fearling wisps made as they slid

through empty spaces, leaving a chill in their wake. And...

...and another voice, calling for him.

Not Jack's voice, or the Nightmare King's, or even a human voice at all. A _roaring._ From somewhere up above his head there a needy weight pushing, pushing, shrieking and demanding...

Okay, okay, Hiccup thought sleepily. _I'm up..._

He stretched out his arms, and-

...and his arms wouldn't move. Hiccup tried to open his mouth, only to find a pressure sealed over his lips - a shadow, of course - _Jack had left it there,_ he remembered suddenly. The reminder alone calmed the twitchy panic already jumping into his limbs - this was all his master's doing. He was safe. The bonds and shadow gag were an order, a direction for him to take comfort in - no moving, no talking...

Safe...

The roaring picked up, and Hiccup felt himself thrash in automatic response, straining senselessly against his bonds. He could feel where the shadows curled around his wrists, fixing them neatly behind his back. And despite the safety, the _importance..._ that sound of calling from above was something he couldn't ignore.

He curled and uncurled his fingers, struggling with all his might and _wanting_ with a fierceness that was utterly alien to him...and there - _there_ - something seemed to fall away and the shadows were melting off of him. He ripped his hands from behind his back in a frenzy, clawing at his face in his rush to peel the gag from his mouth. It took a few tries until the shadow began to weaken, and even then he couldn't get his voice to form - Hiccup's breath was coming quick and short, as if Jack's hands were on his throat again, squeezing...

-but not important.

He stumbled to the cage's door, clumsy on the bad leg. That sound was so all-consuming, like a war declaration. Ferocious. And he knew, somehow, that it had been waiting for him to answer back for a long time.

Missing him for a long time.

Hiccup's hands fumbled at the bars.

Closed.

Right. _Right._ His master must have closed it... it must have - because he _fell_ - because he walked right out the open door and - he - gods, that _sound_ - he couldn't _think._ There were bars in the way and they needed to _go._ Hiccup pushed through with his hands, forcing an arm up to the shoulder between the cold steel and scrambling at the lock on the outside. He had seen what Jack would do with it before, although he had never had a reason to care or study the exact movements. He did know that there was shadow involved. Twisting in into a shape, like a key. His fingers were slippery on

the metal, and the shadows as slick as water around his hands, but by some miracle a heavy click broke through the air and the door was swinging open on it's hinges and-

Hiccup swung his legs over the side, heart hammering. The drop below seemed to stretch on forever. He pushed with his feet and incredibly, the shadow pushed back at him, taking him a step away from the cage - then two - before weakening and falling away entirely.

For one wild, senseless moment, there was no up or down, above and below - just darkness and air, the stony stairways of the Nightmare King's lair and solid rock beneath his feet. His fall, once again, was muted - something that was not Jack caught him before he even had the chance to really gain momentum. The shadows, maybe - fearling hands. Hiccup didn't know. His mind felt sluggish, too hazy and drugged to follow up on the thought.

Forcing himself up on trembling legs was a task, and for a long moment, it seemed an impossible one. But soon the rumbling was picking up again, just as chaotic and desperate as ever, and Hiccup found himself once again with the strength to push forward.

One step in front of the other, the uneven clatter of metal and flesh feet. The animal screaming was his compass, an invisible rope upon the air that Hiccup clung to blindly for direction. There was an uncomfortable fluttering stuck his throat...a heartbeat, probably. There was nothing else it could be, but it sounded so different when it was going wild on it's own like that, without Jack's pulse thudding along there to help. Unsettling, like a thousand moth wings struggling to uncurl themselves between his lungs, tickling the back of his eyes and making his hands shake and shake. His body seemed to move on it's own - not in the way that Jack would inspire, the thoughtless filling of negative spaces and the easy way their mouths fit together. This hurt._

Hiccup stumbled over stone and shadow, arms out for balance, listening to his own heartbeat quicken. The Nightmare King's lair was a labyrinth, narrow as a coffin in places but stretching on endlessly in others. Sometimes the floor would elevate suddenly, or melt away into crooked stairs. Other times it would vanish completely, the gaping dark of sudden drops indistinguishable from the solid slices of black stone. Hiccup picked himself up when he fell, crawled when he hadn't the strength to walk, pushed himself in desperation to his feet when the roaring burst through with enough adrenaline to spur him on anew.

At some point his hand found it's way before him, fingers outstretched, as if the sound was a physical thing he could reach out and touch. Where the darkness became thicker his arm appeared disembodied against it, a pale slice of freckled gray skin standing out against space, impossibly bright with no source of light to illuminate it. He watched it as if it were a lantern, something other than himself leading the way. He watched the fingers twitch and tremble as the volume from above paused and picked up again.

He watched as another hand, twice as large and perfectly steady, tore itself without warning from the dark and locked painfully around his wrist.

Hiccup froze.

By coincidence, so did the roaring. For a moment it was as if time itself had shuddered to a stop, and even the heartbeat thudding within his own head became a din of white noise. His outstretched hand had gone as still as a statue, numb where the other was squeezing it. It wasn't pale skinned, threaded with blue veins like Jack's hand was - this was shades darker, solid and rough as sharkskin. Hiccup could see the cracks in it's nails from where they they were half-sunken into his flesh.

He couldn't summon the bravery to speak. It seemed like a bad idea to even try. He didn't know the Nightmare King like he knew Jack, but he understood that Pitch Black was a different creature entirely.

Hiccup knew him before, but mostly in the low whisper of his laugh and the imprints of his hands on snowy skin, an undeniable but ever-present phantom in their midst. He couldn't remember having ever felt his touch before. His instinct was to lower his head in submission, whisper a word, any sign of offered compliance - but his mouth might as well have been gagged again and his body was frozen to the spot in fear. Even the possibility of shifting his gaze seemed impossible to entertain, so Hiccup kept his eyes fixed ahead, sightless.

He wanted Jack, suddenly and childishly. Someone to give him direction, a clear order to follow.

The roaring picked up again, and a new sound bled into the air to join it - a cry at first, wet and raw, which quickly turned into a high, strained wailing. It took a moment for him to recognize the keening as his own fault.

The Nightmare King did not silence him. He listened for a moment, as still as stone, the harshness of his grasp unwavering.

Then, slowly, he forced Hiccup's hand back to his side and side-stepped into view.

His shape was looming, oblong somehow, like the optical illusion of a shadow stretched over a larger mass. Hiccup wouldn't allow his eyes to focus on the details - there was an instinctual memory there of the dangers of meeting a greater power's stare. So instead he processed shapes - the long triangle jaw, black line of a mouth. A coffin's tapering of shoulders to waist. Two fingers slid themselves beneath his chin, angling his jaw upwards to better examine his face. Hiccup's blood was ice within him.

A new crescendo of calling from above. His own voice swelled in answer. He couldn't keep quiet despite his terror; the whimpering bled from his lips like blood from a wound.

(_go away, please go..._)

Inexplicably, the touch lifted from his jaw. Pitch Black's blurry shape shifted, leaving space enough for him to walk through.

"...go on." he urged quietly. His voice was tar.

It was an order, technically. It didn't feel like one.

"I'm not stopping you, you realize. If you have someone else to attend to, I wouldn't keep them waiting."

Hiccup couldn't move.

"_No...?_" The tone was politely surprised, almost sweet. He was talking to a child.

He couldn't...

"Well, then."

...think...

And then Pitch's hand was back on his face that that was it. There was no option anymore, no chance left to take. Cool fingers slid over his skin like rain, practiced and clinical, brushing over his forehead beneath the bangs. Stopping beneath his eyelid, pausing again at his throat. Counting the heartbeats. His motionlessness was a primal thing, the fear from predator to prey when there was nothing left to do but play dead, stay as silent and still as possible to minimize retaliation.

Despite this, Hiccup couldn't stop his sobbing.

It wasn't like him to behave in any way other than he was instructed, or to lose control of some part of himself so thoroughly...Jack would have gagged him, he thought longingly. He would have put a stop to it right away, silenced the sound with his hands or his cock. Lull him from his misery until he was sleeping again, serene. Hiccup yearned for that freedom, the bliss of having his choice taken away and letting Jack think for him completely.

But this wasn't Jack. This was Pitch, and Pitch listened to every cracked note, every wavering inflection that the sounds from above drew in agony from his mouth. For a beat that stretched on an eternity, he let Pitch's hands make their slow crawl over his face, drink up the tremors in his skin and listen to the sound of him breaking.

And when Hiccup had finally drained himself at last of the strength to wail, Pitch snatched his wrist back up in one long-fingered hand and tugged.

The pull was different than any he had experienced. Rather than falling down, Hiccup fell through, as though the shadows beneath their feet were only fragile bridges to cover darker, hidden depths. Teleporting through shadow was something he had never experienced himself - there was never any reason to, before. For as long as he could remember, his home had been his cage, and anything beyond that was meaningless.

It was his cage he found himself blinking back into now, when the popping in his ears had subsided and the press of shadows had eased up their stranglehold grip. The bars appeared smaller with the two of them contained inside together, filling up more space than Hiccup could ever manage alone, even when Jack was there to help. He fell to the floor when his wrist was released from it's tight hold, not on instruction but merely for lack of strength to stand. The Nightmare

King observed him there for a moment, head canted slightly, before kneeling down at his side and placing a cool hand on his knee.

The sounds from above had stopped completely.

He was aware that he should be grateful for that. It was too painful, that noise. Too confusing. And the Nightmare King's hand on his leg felt so much more real now with nothing else to distract him from the touch. Hiccup stared at the cage ceiling, chest heaving, as the stony fingers slid down to his calf, just above the prosthetic, and stroked place where flesh turned to metal.

He waited, patient and unmoving except for the slow, purposeful draw of his finger over the amputation scars, tracing the seam. Hiccup did not pause to consider what he could be waiting for until the cage rattled with a newly added weight, an uneven lurching that could only mean one thing.

Sure enough, the unlocked door gave a creak of protest as Jack wrenched it roughly open, winded and blinking.

"You're late." Pitch said thoughtfully, not looking up.

"I know." He raked a hand through his hair, sticking the few smoothed down locks stubbornly back on end. There was a cut under his cheek, just below his right eye. It was bleeding, fresh. "I _know_. It's..." He paused for a moment in mid-step, as if just now realizing their position. "...what are you doing?"

The finger paused on it's path. Pitch flattened his palm over the metal stump, then slid his hand carefully downward to the prosthetic where Hiccup could no longer register contact. "I explained something to you when I fetched him for you, remember." he prompted coldly.

Jack let his hand fall from his hair to the back of his neck, sheepish. He toed at the floor evasively, mumbling something Hiccup couldn't hear. "...my responsibility..." The tail end was barely audible through a sigh. "But-"

"A stray fearling... barely an infant, really... wandering alone where anyone could pluck him up for their own purposes...and if by chance he were to find his way back to us unharmed, he could bring any stranger along with him-"

"It was an accident..." Jack broke in quickly, smiling in a way that was beginning to look scared.

"-unless perhaps his people were willing to welcome him back into their care? They had always been so _accepting_ of him before, hadn't they?"

"...I..."

"...ah...so, poor _thing_, he'd be alone again."

"I...I didn't mean to..." Hiccup had never heard his master's voice like this. It sounded glassy, impossibly small. "I didn't know he'd..." From the corner of his eye, he saw the Fearling Prince begin to pace, his head darting back from Hiccup's position on the floor to

the open cage floor, putting the pieces together. "...he's never _done_ that before! I didn't even know he _could!_"

"Didn't know a fearling would have some measure of influence over shadow?" Pitch asked evenly.

"It was _my_ shadow." Jack corrected, clenching and unclenching his fingers. "Why would he even _want_ to...?"

The question hung in their air between them. Hiccup saw Pitch's hands move a fraction, doing something to his foot that he couldn't discern. Jack continued to pace, chewing on his knuckles between breaths and throwing worried glances around his legs.

"When I turned him..." the Nightmare King interrupted him at last, "what did you feel?"

"...uh..._good._" Jack replied, pausing in his steps. His voice flared back to it's previous brightness, face splitting into a cat's grin. "_Really_ good...tighter than I imagined, even."

"His _fear_, you fool boy." Pitch snarled impatiently, and Jack cackled with amusement, holding his hands up in surrender. "What did you feel in his _fear?_"

"I don't know...just - a big tidal wave of it, really." The Prince stared between them for a moment, his feet planted firmly apart. Hiccup could feel blue eyes pinned on his body, digging up an old memory. "He wanted help." he added vaguely, an afterthought.

The Nightmare King went very still.

"...but I helped him, so it's all alright now." Jack finished in a shrug, some of that smile creeping back into his voice.

Silence.

"...Pitch?"

There was a crackling in the air, a sizzle of ozone. The hissing rush of nightmare sand forming. Jack faltered, edging a step closer. "...what are..."

Pitch's other hand appeared above his knee, gripping for balance. A sharp whine pierced the air, the sound of metal being twisted, creaking through the rust.

Jack's voice was climbing to a height Hiccup had never heard before.

"Pitch, come on, that's not _fair!_"

"_Your_ responsibility, as I told you." Pitch answered back curtly. "The moment he steps outside his boundaries, he becomes _my_ responsibility." A screw clattered to the floor. Pitch's hand leveled around his thigh, holding him steady as the prosthetic was removed. "...it's a poor replica of a limb, isn't it?" he added in cold distaste.

Jack made a strange noise in the back of his throat, somewhere between crying and laughing.

"They're Vikings, they're...not all that into 'pretty'..." he started nervously, tapping his nails fretfully against the bars. "...I _like_ his legs, Pitch...he does this, this thing where he wraps them real tight around you..."

Pitch gave a disinterested hum.

"Like leverage, you know? So he can thrust back. He'll ride you like he's starved or something, it's really..._really_ awesome..."

"If he finds his way out again, the other one will have to go." The Nightmare King tapped his flesh foot politely.

Jack trailed off, wide-eyed.

"A shame, as you enjoy it so much."

"Pitch..."

"But he doesn't need to stand to serve the purpose you use him for."

"Pitch, _please_, I said it was an accident!" His hands were back at his head, tangling through the frosted black locks in frustration. "I'm _sorry_, okay?"

The hand slid off his thigh as the Nightmare King glided back to his feet, tossing something carelessly aside as he straightened. It clattered loudly against the bars and landed within the space to his left. Hiccup flinched automatically at the sudden explosion of metallic sound. His left leg, when it twitched in response, felt lighter than before.

Pitch opened his arms.

Jack rushed to fill the space between them immediately, burrowing as the dark hands closed slowly and graciously around him.

"It's not what _I_ want, Jack." he soothed. "I'm looking out for _you_; it's all for your protection. If he were to compromise us..."

"He's not _going_ to!" Jack's voice came back muffled, bitter. "It's not going to happen again. He was just - he was scared. He got scared and he acted a little funny, he's still getting used to everything. And he...he wouldn't be able to join us ever, if you...you said that someday he could..."

"I said if he was good."

"He _is_ good!" Jack burst out, curling his fists against the Nightmare King's chest. "I love him, Pitch! You would too, if you just...!"

...it was his foot. That's what Pitch threw aside. Hiccup straightened his legs, marveling at the unexpected bite of the remaining metal screeching against the steely ground. He supposed he

should feel bothered by the loss - Jack was upset, and usually that was enough to warrant discomfort from Hiccup too - but there was a numbness in his chest that had settled in the moment the Nightmare King pulled him back into his cage, and the notion of feeling anything at all seemed as impossible as getting out again.

"I know it hurts..." His voice floated over their heads, as soothing as a lullaby. "But it's for your own safety. For all of our safety. You understand, don't you?"

"Yeah." Jack whispered tightly.

"I'm saving you." Pitch repeated quietly, combing his fingers through Jack's dark hair with practiced tenderness.

"I know..." Jack rasped. "I love you. I really do, Pitch, I love you..."

Hiccup closed his eyes.

* * *

><p>There were more fearlings around than before. They gathered like tongs of flame below the suspended floor, sliding their inky hands along the steel exterior to soak up his fear. Hiccup could hear them whispering, even when he wasn't conscious to pick up on their sound. Dreaming in Pitch Black's realm weren't like the fleeting thing Jack described from above; these were experiences that stretched on for hours, as vivid as waking moments and nearly impossible to sort apart.<p>

Hiccup knew the difference because when he was awake, the bars were back around him, sectioning off the sinking ruins in slices of monochrome. Jack never left the door open again, of course. The lock was gone completely now, fused in place instead with a measure of shadow and nightmare sand, leaving it completely indiscernible from the the rest of the cage.

When Jack wanted to come in, he teleported through the dark.

Hiccup tried to greet him the first few times, but the missing leg made it impossible to stand, and even gripping at the bars for support took too much strength. After his venture through the Nightmare realm - after the clear impossibility of reaching that distant voice - strength was a difficult thing to muster. The Fearling Prince took a habit of coaxing him to stillness when he came in, though out of love or pity he couldn't tell. Hiccup could feel how disturbed he was through the tremors in his hands, the wild roundness to his eyes that spoke of things other than pleasure, than safety - reflections in the blue that he was not familiar with.

They didn't play the same way either. Maybe it was because Hiccup could no longer greet him the same way. But Jack still kissed him all over, sucked on each finger in turn before stopping at his wrist, holding his lips over the pulse. Sometimes he crawled over him, sealed the space between their bodies with frightful softness, or pulled him carefully into his arms. Sometimes he just paced the cage again, talking and talking, waving his hands about wildly to paint a picture on the air.

Hiccup listened to stories about war and carnage, a village that treated a lovely little boy like trash, and a savior that tucked the child somewhere far far away where the sunlight couldn't burn his skin anymore.

When he slept, he dreamed of blizzards and the snap of teeth. Hair the color of fire. An open sky that crashed down all around him in shards.

Sometimes, that strange screaming called for him again from beyond the cage, and the nightmares became stranger things as the roaring raged on to feed it. He dreamed of crawling through mud with two flesh feet, stitching up an open wound with red hands and a brittle line of silver pinched between his fingers. He dreamed of black wings against a blanket the color of Jack's eyes, folding in on themselves and stretching out again like tattered rags.

When he woke he could feel the empty space on his left side more completely than he had ever felt it before, as if a phantom limb was twitching there, trying to earn it's circulation back.

Mostly, he just slept. He could block out the shaking of his cage from where the Nightmare's lean, animal bodies nudged it. He could tune out their snorting and whining, close-creeping sounds as they tried to push their noses ravenously through the bars.

A cackling voice washed over him, low and clear like a funeral bell. "Rise and shine lazy bones, you gotta get up sometime..."

Yes, Hiccup thought. It came to him easily, the compulsion to agree. He reached out, wanting, for some inexplicable, instinctual reason, to feel the warm texture of scales and the burn of a powerful, beautiful heart.

The skin against his palm was stone-cold.

...he was so _tired..._

"Open your eyes, okay? Come on, look at me..."

Hiccup tried to. There was a hand against his cheek, stroking, and it was so, so nice. It was bliss.

"Come on, look at me! Wake up, Hic, up, come on..."

Five more minutes...

"That's it sweetheart, there you go..." There was a coolness on his forehead. Kisses. "You love me, right? Tell me you love me."

"Yeah..." Hiccup rasped wetly.

"Yeah, you do..." Jack repeated, drawing a vertical line over the dampness his cheek, from his eyelid to the corner of his mouth. "Say it. Say you love me."

Yes, Hiccup thought, _yes._

"And I love you too."

You own me.

"You know that, right?"

Yeah, of course. Of course I do.

Fingers on his wrist again, checking the pulse. They were gone almost as soon as they appeared. Jack's feet, bare and restless, pacing and pacing around him. "Why don't we have a little _fun_, Hic...? Like old times. We haven't fucked for _ages_...whaddya say? You wanna go a round?"

Please...

"It'll probably chase the Nightmares off. I, I told them to leave you alone." Jack huffed, crouching down on his haunches beside him. "They smell your fear, that's why they're like that. Your dripping with it...I don't know _why_..." he added, exacerbad. "I told you you're safe. I _told_ you that..."

His voice was like a rush of cold water, sucking oxygen from the air. Hiccup thought of altitudes, misty clouds and a wide open sky washed over with light. He couldn't remember ever seeing such a thing before. It felt alien in his head, like a photograph slid into his brain, someone else's memory.

"Hey..." Jack's voice was a low, keening whine. "Look at me, Hic." Chilly fingers slipped under his chin, tilting his jaw upward. "Come on, I'm right here. I'm right in front of you! _Look!_"

Hiccup looked. There were blue eyes in front of him. Primary blue, as if someone had carved them from marble and painted in the irises by hand. He was so beautiful, so pale it almost stung the senses. It was like walking outside into the blinding glare of a snowstorm, untouched by footprints and undisturbed by wind. Hiccup wanted to stagger backwards, shield his burning eyes, but Jack said _look_, so he looked.

"You see me, right?" Jack whispered. "Hiccup?"

The fingers tightened, sliding from underneath his jaw to grasp roughly at his face. His nails sank in, digging into Hiccup's cheeks, biting fresh bruises into his skin. "You see me, don't you...? That was the _deal!_ I save you and you _see_ me...come on, don't do this. Don't do this..." Those blue eyes were impossibly wide. "Can't you hear me..?! Hiccup?! _Look at me!_"

Yes. Okay. Yes...

"_LOOK at me!_" Jack raged. His grip seared like a brand, the shape of fingerprints in a fan across his jaw. Someone else's pain. He jerked Hiccup forward by the jaw, tipping his balance, then shoved him with sudden, hysterical fury on to his back. The cage floor was cold enough to be fire, and the shock of bare metal across his shoulders sent shivers burning through. There were fearling eyes in the distance, yellow specks of light. A bright note of fear upon the air, but not his own. It was a different flavor than his own - thick and heady as smoldering coals, sharp as singed mint leaves. The taste crawled into his mouth, sticking like honey in his throat as Jack

kicked his legs open.

A muted thud from his right foot. Heavily clattering of the remaining metal stump from his left. Roaring in the distance; a creature crying and shaking the earth. Jack was mounting him and this time there were no hands locked around his throat but all the same he couldn't find the air to breathe.

It had been a while, since. He was used to it back then, ready to go in a second, but he wasn't loose now the way he before was when this happened every night, and even then his master was never so desperate to have them joined. He felt like a fading thing, drained of blood. Jack must have thought so, too. The violence with which he forced them together was as if he thought Hiccup might disappear from beneath him at any second.

Something was tightening in his chest. A phantom hand, squeezing. He wanted to move - he had to move, Jack needed him to - but it was like his body had become stone, a dead weight he couldn't manage. So Jack moved hard for the both of them, wild and desperate, angry. Every impact of his hips nudged him harder against the floor, etching bruises into his shoulder blades and the bumps of his spine. He watched his hand shaking, pale gray with the fingers all curled like a crushed spider, twitching with every thrust.

Hiccup wondered when the sky had crept in so low. He thought could almost touch the clouds.

He felt empty when Jack slipped out of him. He let one leg thump to the floor, the other - the one that ended just below the knee - hitting hard and reverberating through the steel beneath him. He felt the trickle of wetness inside his thigh, the growing heaviness of his shadow swallowing him up as he stood, hunched and panting. Jack screamed himself hoarse and Hiccup didn't blink, didn't pick his head up from where his owner had left it turned on the floor. He kept on looking, like Jack had ordered him to. At the darkness, blinking back at him with it's yellow eyes. At his hand, laying there like a mannequin's hand and no longer twitching.

"_He doesn't even ****MOVE**** anymore!_" Jack roared, his voice raw and exploding into the darkness. "It's like _fucking a ****CORPSE...!**** I TOLD_ you we needed the dragon, why didn't you _listen!? You ****BROKE**** him!_"

"_I_ broke him?" a voice whispered back, dangerously quiet, and Hiccup saw the shivering line of Jack's shadow freeze to stillness.

There was a sudden, telling coldness in the air that had nothing to do with fearlings or frost. Hiccup felt rather than saw the darkness around them bristle with power as the form of a monster detached itself elegantly from the mass.

"_I broke him?_" the Nightmare King repeated softly, and Jack shuddered, tipping his jaw back and exposing his throat for Pitch's fingers to slide over. "He was broken already, _look_ at him. I told you you could have any toy you wanted, and you had to insist upon the one with parts already _missing._"

Jack was silent, shoulders a downward slope like a melting column,

adam's apple working between the black tar of Pitch's grasp. "I wanted him." he whispered back at last, low and fierce with all the spoiled entitlement of a favorite child.

"Yes," Pitch said sweetly. "And now you have him." Hiccup could feel the glass-gold cut of his eyes scanning over him with a sneer of disgust. "...needy, inconvenient thing that he is."

"No, I have half of him. Pretty soon I'll have none of him." The fear was palpable, even a lesser fearling like Hiccup was all but drowning in it. "He needs the dragon - that's all we needed for him-

"-what we needed a clean turning. He was supposed to be focused foremost on you - you were to be the focal point in his mind. You neglected to tell me he was already bound to another."

"He wasn't! - he isn't! Nobody gave a fuck about him...! Nobody but me..."

"Clearly, someone did."

"But I told you we needed the dragon, didn't I? I told you he'd break without it! I told you..."

The shadows shifted. The Nightmare King, long and lean as a grim reaper, and Jack pressing into him pleadingly, sinking into the stranglehold touches as if they were a safe haven. His voice was different now - throaty and intimate; the last, desperate trick tucked up his sleeve. "Please, Pitch. I promise he'll be worth it. I've seen him kill giants. He turned his whole world upside down without our help. He's special. Imagine what he could do with us behind him...?"

"Imagine."

"Please." Jack begged. "He'll surprise you. I promise he will. I know you'll be impressed with him, we just gotta fix him up, give him the right tools. Get him working all nice and smooth again. You should hear him when he gets to talking, he's so stubborn, he's so funny. You're gonna love him, I swear, he's, he's..."

"...ah."

"- you have to believe me, Pitch, please, please..."

Dirt fell from above in chunks. A body throwing it's weight against the earth, pausing only to breathe for more fire. Hiccup thought he could hear the sounds of digging through the thing's continuous, angry screams.

The Nightmare King heard it, too.

"My dear boy," he muttered distractedly, "I've spoiled you..."

His fanged mouth was centimeters from Jack's, but his attention was elsewhere. Above, Hiccup thought blankly. That's the only other place there was. Here, in the below - his cage, his home...and there, the place he had never even considered until the night Jack ordered him to scream and something else screamed back. The place

where another living being called for him.

Above.

* * *

><p>After that night, Jack didn't touch him. Time passed, and the clockwork visits of the Fearling Prince within the darkness of his confinement slowed and slowed until they finally stopped. He caught glimpses of him now and then - blue eyes peering through the bars, the flash of a scared, twitchy smile born entirely of nervous energy - but the touch of his hands was missing entirely until Hiccup began to forget what the important things felt like. Things like skin on cold skin, the sting of teeth on his neck, or being filled to the brim on his back or stomach or his knees. Things like being owned, in a position where he had nothing left except to _be_ owned.

He was a possession not important enough for his owner's touch, a thing that had broken upon impact. He remembered the fall, a distant thing from a distant time - streaking like a comet through fire, screaming to be caught. Whoever was supposed to catch him didn't, so here he was with his bones all shattered and his insides leaking out. There were words once, things he understood, little threads of direction to cling to and follow. They had been carved into his skin by Jack's nails and pointed teeth, but time had blurred the letters over until he couldn't recall the phrasing anymore.

Over days, Jack's face beyond the bars began to appear in red. There was a line of it from his lip to his chin one day, a smear across his forehead the next. Hiccup was fascinated by the color, something he knew in a basic sense but had never really seen before until Jack came peeking in at him with streaks of it across his gray-washed skin. The crooked staff in his hand was streaked with frost ferns. Usually, for their games, he had set it apart...but they didn't play anymore, of course, so Jack kept it glued to his side.

He needed it, if he was beginning to bleed. Deep down, he knew the signs. Jack had been fighting something.

Someone.

He still talked during their visits (_i love you so stop that get up it's gonna be alright okay i promised im saving you i_) but Hiccup couldn't listen. There was sounds from above sometimes, but Hiccup couldn't answer. His brain was filled with mist, an aimlessness that had settled in heavily from the disconnection. A compulsion to agree, on the surface. A blankness of nothing to agree _to._

And beneath that an alien fury, a stubborn thing in the very back of his mind, picking at his surroundings for ways out and finding none. Listening to the above-sounds and straining for a name to put to the voice. Something dug tunnels through his ribs and prodded at his heart and said things like _are you stupid? or just crazy? this isn't love._

On the day that it ended, Jack perched outside his cage, forehead to the steel, and said nothing at all.

The Nightmare King came to collect him with a hand to the small of

his back. And for a while there was nothing, nothing, nothing outside or inside of him and nothing all around, and Pitch was whispering, _he's stopped singing, you realize - your canary_, and Jack's hands were stranglehold tight on the bars.

It was moments before the high-pitched whine of the sound barrier breaking.

Moments before his world exploded.

Moments before dust billowed up into the air and the Nightmares were screaming, an army surging in to fight, before the fire hit his cage and he was staring up at metal with a hole blasted through it, the bent bars twisted and glowing red with heat. Smoke bled from the steel in currents, blocking out the beat of inky black wings. Hiccup's mouth was open, like he was trying to scream, but something else was screaming for him and it was a thousand times stronger: a dragon's rage.

The cage floor tilted beneath him. He could hear the chain whining in it's struggle to hold.

A hand on his wrist, ripping him from the wreckage before it collapsed entirely.

Oh, Hiccup thought hollowly.

An inky shape was thrashing in the fog. The roaring was deafening at this range, blasting out all possible thought and leaving nothing left in his brain except for that _sound_. It made him burn - everywhere, burning - his eyes and his brain and his heart - an entirely different spectrum of heat than the icy bite his master would sear into him.

Hiccup wasn't in the center of the din for long. Whoever had pulled him from the chaos quickly set him down on lower, solid ground and was off in a flash. Hiccup flattened his hands out over the new terrain - cool stone bathed in shadow - and pushed to get his head and shoulders off the floor. Moving again when he had been still for so long wasn't an easy task, but it seemed quite suddenly like the most important thing he could ever attempt to do.

There was a body in front of him, facing away. It wasn't the a fearling, or any other creature of darkness. Not the Prince, or the Nightmare King. It wasn't even _humanoid_. The size of it was staggering - easily larger than a full grown Nightmare and solid on all the angles where the shadow creatures flickered and twitched.

And there were _wings._ Not ragged, wind-bitten things like Hiccup had dreamed of, but spiny and sharp, stretched out protectively before him. It's back was hunched low, hackles raised. Growling, spitting. Red splashed about it's tail - not a liquid red Jack had worn on his skin, but bloodlessly bright. A banner.

Fin, something in his head corrected numbly. _Tail fin._

There was a skull painted on it, the very color of bone.

Nightmares surged forward, and the creature lunged to meet them.

Hiccup watched it's teeth snap over the black sand of the horses necks, claws raking over the purple-black shapes of calves and slithering manes until they dissolved away in defeat. The tail fin thrashing back and forth, a waving hand of red. Despite the sheer number of it's opponents, the dragon had a determination they could not match. It dove in to fight fearlessly where the Nightmares shrank back until even the most hardened of it's foes shrunk back in fear.

And then there was a bite of laughter - a warning - before it's accompanying bolt of frost splintered like lightening over the air. Jack was there, lithe and battle-ready, faster than Hiccup had ever seen him move so fast.

But the dragon was faster.

His master darted in close - for a second, just a second, and a great black paw slammed down over his throat, pinning him effortlessly to the ground. The staff went spinning, the white frost vanishing from it's wooden surface moment his fingers lost their connection.

The dragons jaw stretched wide, and all along the inside lay the spikes of white teeth-

(Could have sworn... Hiccup thought randomly.)

-a bubble of building gas and the sparks of a nearing explosion, and Jack was screaming and Hiccup was screaming along with him and somehow, unexpectedly, the creature heard.

The dragon's mouth snapped closed just inches from Jack's face and whipped around to look straight at him.

Hiccup saw green-gold eyes, round saucers of intelligent life with the pupils blown wide and worried. There was a bubbling kind of purr coming from the dragon's throat, a motherly sound he had never heard before, but it drew something from him that he couldn't explain away, a feeling of safeness totally unlike anything Jack had instilled in him.

"H-hey..." Hiccup croaked.

His voice sounded raspy, disconnected. It wasn't the sound he heard around Jack, the throaty, eager tone he was so used to being coaxed from him. This was higher, sweeter, bursting with a kind of passionate gratitude like he was being gifted his first real breath of pure air and realizing, quite suddenly, that he had been taking it in wrong all along.

The dragon's paw flexed against Jack's neck. The Fearling Prince was hissing in pain, fingers clawing uselessly at muscular creature's arm and ice forming in brittle, uneven ferns over it's scales.

The dragon twisted to face him, not letting up it's grip, and Hiccup saw a kind of horror in the beast's face that made his chest ache.

He tried to crawl forward. The dragon leaned in for him, it's claws still skewered tight around Jack's sprawled form. Hiccup saw his own tiny hand reaching out for the dragon's muzzle, trembling.

He had known this sight, before.

His palm met with scales, cool and dry. He could feel the resonance of the dragon's breathing rippling from the center of his hand down through his arm and into his chest, into his brain, clearing out the smoke that had settled there.

Toothless, he thought. The dragon nudged his cheek with it's nose, a low, tangled sound emitting from it's throat. Whimpering. From what seemed like a thousand miles away, Jack was calling for him, struggling to manage words from beneath the weight of the dragon's grasp. Hiccup felt a tug in his core, a need to answer, but the warmth against his face and the fierce burn of leathery scales was too lovely to ignore.

Hiccup nudged himself beneath the dragon's jaw, wrapped his arms around it's wide neck. His vision was going blurry again. It wasn't so alarming, this time.

"Hey there, bud..." he whispered.

This part came so _naturally._ It was like being rewritten with the creature's heartbeat thudding against his cheek, breathing in secret words. He could feel the fury beginning to fade from it's strong pulse, it's grip on the Fearling Prince easing up enough to curl it's wings around Hiccup's shoulders.

The air going cold, as another monster detached itself from the darkness.

Gold eyes blinking to life behind his back.

And the Nightmare King's savage growl as the black blade of his scythe sprung forward, burying itself into the dragon's back.

Hiccup had heard Toothless's scream before, a thousand times in his dreams and from far away, the distant rumble from the world of above. But right beside him it was deafening, enough to rattle teeth and shake the sinking ruins beneath their knees. Hiccup clung with his hands to the trembling back form, running his fingers over it's heaving chest. There was a place beneath it's jaw he seemed to know like a secret map, patches that his palms fit themselves into perfectly. "It's okay, it's _okay!_" he stammered. "I'm right here bud, it's gonna be okay-"

The scythe was gone. There was no blood. Pitch Black was a looming shape over Toothless's wilting wings, his gray spider's hands splayed flat between the spiny shoulder blades.

The dragon's great, shuddering breaths were beginning to even out.

"That's it, there you go buddy-," Hiccup babbled in a rush. He couldn't seem to stop. "I got you. I got you Toothless, we're okay now, we, we're good, we're all good..."

You caught me, he thought passionately, and suddenly it's all he could think, all he could say. Again and again, clutching Toothless's cold neck, blinking the liquid out of his eyes. "_You caught me, you

- **I** - you're _amazing_, you _caught_ me, you really, really _did..._"

Someone was laughing, weak and cold. Jack, it had to be Jack. He sounded strangled from the pressure on his neck, still getting his second wind back. But he'd be fine. He'd be alright.

Everything was going to be alright.

Pitch drew his hands back, his eyes as sharp as glass. His mouth was twisted into an open grimace, stepping back swiftly to get a better picture of the scene before him. Hiccup caught his gaze for a split second before remembering to avert his eyes. The dark line of Pitch's lips was stretched wide, sharp with discord and rage but already twitching upwards at the edges.

He was looking at Hiccup with something like awe, like _hunger_, as if he was something suddenly precious and newly promising. As if he were a weapon with the blade facing out, ready to be wielded. Jack was laughing still, weightless with it, but Pitch was perfectly quiet, the weight of his eyes still on Hiccup's back, mouth slightly open, staring still at the dragon and the boy together as if he had never seen them properly before until now.

Hiccup nuzzled himself against Toothless's heart, crying with relief. The black wings were wrapped tight around him. He wanted nothing more than to nest there and fall asleep in his embrace. He had done so before, he thought. Again and again, before. As senseless and strange as it was, he _knew_ it. Just like he knew that the fire was real, the fall was real. Like he knew the creases of his master's palms and the easy place he belonged, inside of black stretch of sky with his other half and all the missing pieces of him slotted back into place.

Hiccup buried his face into a warm, warm neck. And Toothless's eyes, when they opened again, were a fearling's gold.

3. The Hollow Men

my tumblr at chiwandering has a whole ugly tag and art about this screwy series (and now an askblog at , dear god someone stop me) should you desire more ugh. I'm extremely paranoid about trigger warning this thing so bheaDS UP/b this whole series is super dark, please be prepared and read the warnings!

This one's for Bubbles/berktoburgess, seriously super major extra awesome kudos to this lovely lady who was incredibly helpful in ironing out details for part three here and let me role-play/test drive Fearling Hiccup out on her own Dragon Lord Hiccup. Cannot stress how helpful and inspiring role playing with her has been for this monster ughhhhhh

Again, make sure you've read the past installments, The Sky in a Cage and The Canary before this one, at the very least so you know what level of fucked up to expect. Rape and violence are the blanket warnings but there's certainly more to it than that, so be careful. Hiccup is an unreliable narrator so yes/no lines are very blurred and certainly not to be trusted from his perspective.

Jack, Hiccup, and Toothless are all fearlings - this takes place not too long after The Canary's end.

Thank you thank you to those who encouraged and left feedback for this thing, it's been really awesome and I can't tell you how much I appreciate the comments! aaaand, final note. Apologies for the wait. It's an exhausting project to update despite how invested I am in the fearling disasters.

Thank you ;i v i ;

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><p>the hollow men<p>

* * *

><p>This is the dead land
>This is cactus land
Here the stone images
>Are raised, here they receive
The supplication of a dead man's hand
>Under the twinkle of a fading star.<p>

Is it like this
>In death's other kingdom
Waking alone
>At the hour when we are
Trembling with tenderness
>Lips that would kiss
Form prayers to broken stone.

T.S. Elliot, The Hollow Men

* * *

><p>Time was an amorphous thing in the Nightmare Realm, sliding and dripping like sand between his fingers. Were it not for the fading violet-blue of bruises to measure between the thralls of sleep, Hiccup would have not even paid the passing of hours a second thought.<p>

But there was more to judge with now than just the ebbing bite of nails left branded into his skin, more than even the healing marks of a dragon's talons against his master's pale body. Hiccup had watched them go from hard, angry splotches of color to silky white scars and finally to nothing at all, the once-bleeding lines seamlessly erased upon an expanse of glassy skin.

But Jack had been the only factor of marking time by before. Now that Hiccup was free to explore, the lair of the Nightmare King was a land so incredibly _vast_ that he found himself staggering to comprehend the enormity of it, let alone the hints of history lying within. Even the places where he had been led, taken pace-by-pace with the nearby snorting of a restless Toothless by his side, had been an endless labyrinth that twisted and turned as far as the eye could see. Of all the pathways laying tauntingly before them, Jack would choose just one, and Hiccup would stumble along after, clinging tight to his arm for fear of being lost.

(Although it wasn't _fear_ that touched him, per se. There was nothing like fear when Hiccup felt the heat of dragon's breath close over his shoulder, and nothing like being lost when Toothless's heartbeat was tucked away and beating strong within his center like

the point of a dagger sunken into a faded map.)

Jack showed him a room of crumbling pillars and a winding staircase that seemed to crawl up the walls and over the ceiling. He caught the murky corner of a still pool of water whose depth he could not begin to guess at, a fallen fixture that looked as if it might hold the rotting spines of ancient books, and a cavern embedded with crystal that shone with eerie light despite the gloom of its surroundings.

One night, when Toothless was in yet another deep, deep slumber, Jack took him even further.

He was a quick and nimble creature, while Hiccup was weak for balance and favored his right side more readily than the left. But Jack knew the twists and turns of the Nightmare Realm with an ease that was second nature. He ducked to miss stalactites without sparing them a judging glance, hopping over still pools of water as if picking his way through invisible stepping stones upon the air. Hiccup tried his best to keep pace and trusted Jack to keep him upright when he began to trip. It was in equal parts a lack of coordination as it was disorientation to begin with; he wasn't practiced with navigating spaces this large.

(-ten paces of steel beneath his feet; enough to lay down without touching the sides-)

With Jack's hand clamped around his wrist like a manacle, he could already feel the swell of an ocean within him, the one that yearned for the way Jack smiled at him and soaked up every blissful drop of praise. Whatever the Fearling Prince was planning, it was enough to leave him bouncing on the balls of his feet, and in no time Hiccup found himself aching for it too. Burning for it, even. Restless and tangled and stumbling through the maze of the Nightmare Realm, tugged roughly by Jack's bruising hand and _wanting_ whatever it was just as badly as Jack wanted to bestow it. At last they reached a flat wall of rock that Jack seemed to recognize with giddy enthusiasm, running his hand over the smooth surface once before whirling to face Hiccup. His blue, blue eyes were blown wide with excitement, the only bit of color in their monochrome world.

"Close your eyes," he ordered eagerly.

Hiccup did as he was told. A moment later a chilly hand curved over the back of his knees, another bracing itself at his back, and he was lifted with a surprised squawk right off the ground.

"Hey now, relax! I got you..." He could feel Jack's heart thumping away beneath his skin. The sickly, drugged beat of it came at odds with the rush of mania that surged through his wiry body. "And don't open them 'till I say or you'll ruin the surprise."

There was a rush of wind and the squeezing pressure of traveling through the dark. Hiccup's ears were ringing, dizzy from the blind teleportation, when a wall of stormy heat impacted him in unexpected force. He breathed in unfamiliar air, heavy with moisture and thick enough to choke on. There was salt within it - ocean air, maybe. Pine...

The urge to peek sent a flicker of apprehension through his lax

expression.

Jack noticed. The cool pad of his thumb stroked roughly over the back of a bare, freckled knee. "You looked real good in a blindfold..." he recalled teasingly.

Hiccup squeezed his eyes more tightly shut.

"Good boy." A kiss, just below his left eye. His insides tangled in a warm flutter of papery wings at the gesture. "You ready?"

"Ready." Hiccup mumbled.

There was a tipping in altitude. Hiccup clung tight with his hands as his flesh foot slipped and collided against something solid. The prosthetic connected a moment later, and soon they were both steady on a rough surface, drier than the cavernous ruin of underground and imbued with a unusual heat. Jack fixed his hands over Hiccup's eyes and said, "Open!"

The net of his fingers appeared blue-gray in the minimal light, tangling against his eyelashes.

Peeking through his knuckles was something strange and gleaming...

Then his hands were peeled away and Hiccup was reeling back against him, thinking _what? and _where? and _gods, oh gods_ all at once.

In the sky - in the _sky_, because that's what it had to be, the sky from Above - and he had never seen a black sky like this before, only dreamt of it- there was a light pinned high up above him unlike one he could ever remember witnessing. His brain supplied the word '_moon_' just seconds before Jack hummed the name under his breath. It was _dazzling_, almost too large to fit within the shocked circles of his gawking eyes. The shadow he was cloaked in felt weak in the light of it, almost translucent, as if that silvery face from Above was slowly peeling layers from his very skin.

Jack watched his reaction excitedly, eyes wide and darting with greedy glee over Hiccup's stunned face. He couldn't manage a word in return, only a a tiny, hushed sigh. His eyes were beginning to sting already. A reluctant blink supplied him with aftershocks, blue-black circles that popped and fizzled in a bizarre, careless dance behind his eyelids. Automatically, he raised a hand to try to rub them away.

"What's..." he started uselessly. "...I..._Jack_...!"

"Your first real taste of Above." Jack supplied with relish. "Got you a front row seat and everything..._you're welcome_. It's good, right?...do you like it? ...your mouth's hanging open, you know." he finished affectionately, flicking a finger over his lower lip with an amused snuffle. Hiccup hurriedly closed it.

"S-sorry-"

"It's all right." His voice dropped a notch, husky, and Hiccup felt quite suddenly as if he was on his back again, as if Jack was prising

his legs apart to settle deep into his nook between them, and the moonlight was just another shade to vivisect him lovingly beneath as he drank up every gasp and moan. "It's a lot to take in at once, isn't it?"

His voice had a strength to it despite it's wispy rasp, winding around in Hiccup's brain like a plume of thick black smoke.

"I can take it." Hiccup murmured intently through the haze, and Jack swelled with pride and rubbed a loose oval against his hip, fingers stretching to skitter along his belly like a spider.

"Are you _hungry?_" he purred.

The question halted to a stop in his brain, utterly nonsensical and completely unexpected. Hiccup tried to let it unfold itself there, develop into something that could be reshaped with proper meaning on his tongue. But despite the hollowness of it, he didn't feel spurned by the confusion, either. And the answer to Jack's questions was usually the same. So Hiccup said, "Yes."

"_Good._" Jack beamed. "Cause Pitch and I are gonna fill you right up, don't you worry your pretty little head~ Full to _bursting_...I can't _wait,_ you're gonna love it." The hand on his belly flattened, rubbing in wide, lazy circles that left his midsection feeling cold and strangely empty. "And I've waited a _long_ time, you know?" he added in an undertone.

He had no idea. But Jack seemed to be waiting for an answer, so he nodded and nodded, eager to supply. The Fearling Prince's smile splintered from ear to ear.

For a moment they just stood there, Jack's hand lazily pressed to his stomach, Hiccup with his arms still at his sides. He could sense the proud, defiant way his master was grinning back up at the moon, as if Hiccup were a gem on his finger that the distant stars could only hope they could touch.

"...he really likes you, by the way..."

...he?

The sentence was offered up like a long-awaited gift, wrapped up and tied with a bow. Hiccup got the impression it was something he had been waiting to say, something he was supposed to be overjoyed with it. Jack's pride alone was nearly tangible, so he quirked his mouth and tried to soak in pride that fell in a steady drip from his parted lips. It started slow, just a tiny bubble of happiness within his chest, but Jack urged him on with bright eyes and stroking hands until it swelled and shone fit to pop. "He just never got to see you the right way before. You're tiny, Hic, but _wow_, do you pack a lot of punch...it's kind of hard to believe sometimes..." The Prince clicked his tongue, staring off into the space behind his right ear as if drawing on a distant memory. "But he believes it now..._hah_, I just knew he'd love you! You're really, _really_ hard not to love!"

He? Hiccup thought again. The bubble inside him wavered, caught by an unfamiliar wind. "...as...as in..."

"Pitch. Come on. You know Pitch! Tall guy? Lots of teeth?"

"Oh." Hiccup said. And then once more; "Yes."

"And you wanna make him happy, right?"

There was something stirring inside him, beneath the ever-surging tide of joy that came with bringing that grin to Jack's face, beyond the compulsion to agree that clouded his brain and lifted his heart and threaded his body with the calm of safety.

Hiccup thought of lying on his back with his left foot missing, and Pitch's fingers debating the worth of the right.

"Yes." he whispered again.

"And we'll take care of you when you're up here." A nuzzle against his cheek; Hiccup savored it with a happy sigh until Jack's icy skin left his once more. "You're safe. You're ours."

Ours, ours, ours. It resonated in his head endlessly, as if the words had been screamed into the caverns of the Nightmare Realm, tangled it up in fierce and ringing echoes rather than whispered it with intimate care into the shell of his ear. It took a few sleeps to deduce for himself why the word left him unsettled, but he came to the right conclusion soon enough.

For years, he knew the tone, the husky lilt and hungry bite, he knew the elation of being folded up and blessed with kisses and tucked into the arms of someone who loved him. He knew the exact inflection of the Fearling Prince's gifted words, like a promise he'd rather die than break - he'd heard it a thousand times after all, both waking and sleeping and everywhere in between.

But it wasn't until that night that the phrasing changed, and Jack choose to say 'ours' instead of 'mine.'

* * *

><p>The dream that took him that night was one of his reoccurring visitors.<p>

Hiccup was laying on a bed of ash, with something thick and slippery dragging repeatedly over one side of his face and through his hair until it stuck up on end. There were tongues of fire in the distance trying their best to creep closer, but every time one tried to lunge forward and set him aflame, a growl from behind him sent them skittering back again.

As he woke, the false details fell away slowly - the crumbling earth, the blinking faces of red - leaving only the slimy coat that remained cooling on his cheek. Hiccup turned towards the direction it came from, bewildered, and found the next drag of damp muscle painting a messy stripe straight up from his chin to his forehead.

"Euagh...!"

A rumble snickered back at him - not a growl, he thought dazedly, but a cooing purr that snatched away the last lingering fragments of

the nightmare from his sleepy mind. Hiccup spat the bitter taste from his mouth and threw his hands in exasperation against a warm and decidedly larger body. His skin met smooth, dry scales that hitched with delight.

"Can you _not?_" Hiccup hissed into the dark. The words came out slurred, thoughtless, and were met with another playful lick. "_Toothless!_"

More rumbling. And a weaker hitch in his own chest - a _human_ rumble. Laughter. His own. Hiccup grinned, nuzzling himself closer to his friend as the details of his own world came easing back into reality - cool stone with traces of dust beneath him. Certainly no layer of volcanic ash, no. A leathery wing folded around - yes, yes, this he knew. And a few blinking lanterns of yellow in the distance...the eyes of curious fearlings.

...they _were_ making quite a bit of noise.

Sorry, he thought automatically, rubbing the dragon's sticky saliva out of his eyes before it began to sting. "Right, yeah, okay, I'm up. I'm _up_, buddy..."

He could make out Toothless's streamlined shape more as he blinked himself awake. A great wide head, tipped in amusement, turned to face him. Nubs of white lay evenly within his jaw, curving inward to subtle points and aligned in two grinning rows. His eyes were the most noticeable, enormous as they were, their glow serving to rouse him more steadily awake. They were gold and shining as if blown from glass, with a beautiful undertone of acid green beneath. Hiccup could just make out the blearily outline of his own damp, untidy head within mirrors of dilated pupils.

It took a moment of squinting at his reflection to realize the image was upside down, and another to take full inventory of their position. He was on his back, fitted parallel to Toothless's side, one leg kicked out in the throes of dreaming and the other enveloped in blackness from the knee down. He could feel the slightest tingle of pins and needles already pricking up through his thigh.

For a long moment he just stared at the stump, entranced by the bloodless _nothingness_ of how it ended...and then Toothless purred at him curiously again, adjusted his weight, and there beneath the dragon's paw was a metal prosthetic.

Hiccup let his head fall back and thought; _of course._

He was wide awake, now.

But waking in the Nightmare Realm was always a disorientating experience.

They were resting on a crop of rock just outside one of the towering colosseum formations that Jack called _'hives.'_ They were naturally formed houses of sorts, and the favorite resting places of Nightmares and fearling wisps. From his perch outside, Hiccup had a clear view of the open expanse of the Nightmare Realm - or as clear as the shadows would allow. There was an illusionary charm to the flatness of the walls, a lack of depth that made their distance impossible to guess.

There were cages above his head, ancient and jagged silhouettes that stretched as far as the eye could see. Hiccup counted the suspended fixtures the same way Jack talked of counting sheep: deliberately at first, then dreamily and without a thought. Here in a corner was the three smallest fixtures. There in the distance was the one with its door always left hanging open. Some seemed to be lined with perches, as if sculpted for the tiny feet of birds: twenty seven, if it wasn't a trick of the eyes. It was very hard to tell, sometimes, when you were looking up into the darkness. And besides, the shadows liked to shift.

There were ten still wet with melting ice, three half-blocked by an inky wing, and only one with the bars twisted and melted, hanging from a worn and fire-blackened chain like a rotting corpse ready to plummet from its hook.

The black sheep of cages. Or the Canary's cage, as Jack sometimes called it. Hiccup watched that one the longest, tracing the scorched metal with a far-away eye until Toothless's nudging and licking could be ignored no longer. He pushed himself unsteadily to his feet, holding his friend's side for balance.

Cold in the air...

Jack was nearby, of course. It wasn't just the temperature - he knew it by the faint tug at his center, the way Toothless's eyes took to squinting. They walked a few paces, Hiccup with his hand resting behind the Night Fury's ears, the red of his tail fin waving behind them like a bloody banner...and sure enough, a skip of glacial fingers ticked over his spine the moment they passed one of the open tunnels of the great hive. Hiccup's startled gasp was quickly swallowed up by the sounds of the Fearling Prince's laughter.

"Just in time!" he preened, reaching for him greedily with one hand. The other was tucked behind his back, curled tight around the length of a frost-covered staff. "We're going-"

"-going?_"

"-don't worry! You'll like it! And don't mention the moon either - that was our little secret." The hand fixed itself around his upper arm and began to pull. Hiccup stumbled to keep beside him, Toothless quick at his side, when Jack stopped to spare him an apologetic grimace. "-whoa-a-a there, and you can't bring the big guy...I love 'em too, but it's supposed just us tonight, you know?"

"Where are we going?" Hiccup started again, anxiously.

"I thought you were hungry." Jack quipped back, lofting a brow.

There was no proper reply to that. Hiccup stalled, wavering on mismatched feet, before turning regretfully to the gold-bright eyes of his best friend.

...they weren't always together, really. And Toothless slept a lot anyway. It had worried him at first, but as Jack had reasoned with him that since he was a large creature, he would need to sleep larger too. Toothless was new, and unused to anything but Hiccup. For one

reason or another, it made him uneasy to turn his back on the darkling dragon, as if maybe he'd circle around fully only to find nothing left to retrieve.

Hiccup stroked his hands over Toothless's head, traced the patterns of scales beneath his throat that he knew as well as a second skin, and smiled back into the lantern lights of beautiful, intelligent eyes.

"I'll see you soon." Their gaze held until the dragon's tense form began to relax. Hiccup pressed their foreheads together consolingly. Pecked an innocent kiss to his snout. And then he was being whisked away with Jack's eager excitement pulsing like a second heartbeat within his head, and there was nothing more to say.

Stalactites. Tiny ponds. A sense of deja vu occurred to him- he thought knew this path, despite the trickster charm of the Nightmare Realm. Or maybe it was the sense of joy that made him recall a similar night, hurrying along by the same person with the same intentions. Soon they approached a wall of rock, purposeful in it's set place. And standing in front of it...

/Oh./

He was whipped around a moment later, so that the waiting vision was mostly obscured by Jack's dazzling face. The Fearling Prince licked his thumb, diving in to rub a stray spot of dust from Hiccup's cheek. He stroked his hands down over the charcoal mop of hair, flattening a few stray locks that Toothless had cemented at odd angles.

In the distance by the wall, that great black shape continued to pluck chords in his heart. He could feel the phantom memory of fingers on his pulse, counting the beats...

Then Jack took him by the shoulders and steered him boldly forward, step by excitable step until Hiccup was inches away from the Nightmare King's waiting figure.

He didn't need to look up to know how steadily Pitch was watching him, now.

Hiccup stared hard at the grainy texture of his skin, the way the shadow on him seemed to lay unbreathing. The deja vu was stronger now, with Jack's voice echoing alongside; _ours, ours, ours._ He wondered distantly if he was supposed to lift his eyes or lower them, but the only thing that seemed tangible in his head was the tightness of Jack's hands at his shoulders, holding him proud and steady like a sacrificial offering.

"He's _good_, isn't he?" he prompted smugly when Pitch didn't comment. There was a vicious brand of victory in his eyes, reveling in the long-awaited look that must have held clear in the Nightmare King's gaze. "Didn't I tell you?"

Pitch took a lock of hair between his thumb and forefinger and stroked it thoughtfully. Hiccup felt his hand connect, a caress of the back of his knuckles along a bloodless cheek.

His heart pounded thickly in his throat, weighing down his tongue like a stone.

"He's very good." Pitch conceded at last, quietly.

"You wanna fuck him?" Jack leaned forward on his toes. "I can get him all ready for you-"

"We have a feast to attend, remember."

"Come on, it'll be fun! Just a quickie. He can take it! Hey, Hiccup - you can take it, right?"

...he knew he could. Of course he could. It was just so very difficult to speak with that stone weighing down his tongue.

"...Hiccup?"

"Yeah." he managed at last, and was relieved to hear the sound of his voice held no hint of trembling. "Yeah - sure." Sure he could. Jack would love him to. Hiccup would love to. Where? When? Was he supposed to get on his back right now? Pitch wasn't saying anything, but Jack's hands were ticking along his spine, lower and lower, and the shadows draped on him suddenly felt as flimsy and loose a covering as air.

Pitch's hand was very still against his cheek. And then it parted, closing to fit instead around his wrist. There was no bite of broken nails against his skin; this touch was firm, unconcerned with escape.

"Close your eyes." Jack crooned again.

Hiccup closed his eyes and thought, here goes.

He couldn't remember his first time with Jack. It was funny, he had never really considered there to have been a first time at all. There was just Jack, sweet and beautiful and icy cold around him, and then Hiccup, so happy and greedy and overwhelmed with getting him in deep...

When was that? He recalled not too long ago - a week? A month? - laying on his back and savoring every inch...but it couldn't have been the first time, of course not...it was just that Jack was always there, for as far back as he could remember...

Well. It didn't matter. It wasn't as if the first time could have been all that different. It was just that if could recall it, he could compare.

Like...was his stomach supposed to be twisting? What did Pitch like, anyway? Did he like the things that Jack liked? Shouldn't they be laying down, at least? It seemed an awful lot of effort to stand up as they were. And Pitch was tall, taller than him by a long shot. They used to - Jack, that was - they used to...against the wall of his cage...and Hiccup had just held on the bars. But it had taken a lot of strength to hold himself off the ground like that, and he wasn't strong like Jack was. Jack had supported him, mostly. And when he hadn't, he had just watched his knuckles go white with the effort to support himself. And he - yeah, that was fine, too...more than fine, that was bliss...but...there were no bars here, so...

So, what? Just the wall? He could do that...or maybe he was _supposed_ to lay down? Hiccup couldn't see - how long should his eyes stay closed? Maybe he'd get a blindfold...

...

...a blindfold would be nice...

He felt so hollow, alone save that steely hand on his wrist and Jack's excitement coursing through him. No tug at his center from the Nightmare King, just a buzz in his brain. A _drone._ A rushing feeling joined the mix, as if the ground underneath him was moving. Hiccup thought suddenly of aftershocks behind his eyelids, the moon's phantom shape popping up in the darkness, and tried to recall exactly what shapes had been hiding inside it's silver-white face.

Moisture in the air...heat...

"Open up."

Hiccup blinked back to life. And sure enough by that change in atmosphere, they were no longer in the Nightmare Realm.

They weren't even under the _moon._

They were in another room, this one cramped and saturated with color. Wooden walls. Unlit candles. This had to be Above, because Hiccup had never seen anything like it.

It was _beautiful._ Brown and gold slept within the pine-scented walls, lending a warm, reddish hue to his surroundings. Supporting beams stood close and cozy, sculpted into interesting shapes as if by human hands. There were discs of metal on the wall, the points of large and well-polished knives. Hiccup saw one with a handle smelted to look like a dragon's face, it's eye painted red like a fallen drop of blood.

In the very center of the room was a bed, with a heavy axe resting and readied against the frame. And above that - the only source of light for as far as the eye could see - a halo of gold danced, arranged shapelessly above the headboard like a glittering thought bubble. It wasn't so radiant as the moon, but it came with a light of it's own, casting a cozy yellow glow over nearby surfaces.

It's form was familiar - sand. But not Pitch's sand, which was dark and speckled with grains of violet and emerald. It didn't even _move_ like Pitch's sand, that wispy and curling wind of skeleton fingers...this was like water, swelling and breathing gulps of fresh air.

The shapes were sluggish, at first. Movements of a tide. Crescent of a stranger's smile. The pointed wing of a dragon. Hiccup watched one wing split into two, and a bird-like body form slowly in between. It's crest looked like a crown of broken needles. _Nadder_, Hiccup thought randomly. _Deadly Nadder._ He couldn't take his eyes away.

Beside him, Jack ducked into the shadows. Not a second passed before Hiccup saw the whites of his eyes blink to life on the opposite side

of the room, hidden within a murky corner where the golden glow failed to touch. He was only faintly visible, mostly given away by the excited bouncing on the balls of his feet, but the shadows about him twitched and stretched in stripes, arranging themselves in a spidery claim over the room as they unfurled like a dozen reaching hands.

The Fearling Prince crept forward, gripping his staff loosely, and bent to peek past the sparkling sand and into the bed itself. A toothy smile lit his face. He gestured, and Hiccup felt Pitch's hand fit itself into the small of his back and push.

Speechless, thoughtless. His bare feet on the wooden floors made no sound at all. And when at last he reached Jack at the side of the bed, he noticed for the first time a human figure sleeping within it.

It was a _woman._

She was resting on her side, one hand loosely balled in woolen sheets. Strong, lithe...as tall as Jack, even. She must have been at least twenty years old. Her hair was a pale shade of the sand that shifted above her, and her skin was bright. Pink. Pink in her cheeks, at her throat, full and pretty in the rosebud of her mouth. Hiccup had never seen so much _color_ in a person before. It was as if she were lit from the inside, a creature made of embers that glimmered even in slumber.

Jack was watching him now. Hiccup couldn't see his face, but he could feel the quietness within him, as if he were waiting for something very important to happen. Hiccup stared down at the stranger in the bed - her round moon face, the oval eyes - and wondered what color they were underneath.

"Does she worry you?" Pitch asked softly.

"Not exactly." His voice sounded miles and miles away.

"And what does that mean? Not exactly?"

"It means...it means, no..."

The Nightmare King considered this for a long moment. The woman was motionless save for the faintest flicker of her eyes darting about beneath the lids. A rise and fall of her chest. Watching dreams unfold. Those tiny movements were fascinating too, in a way different than the silky slide of shadows he had grown accustomed to. There was a texture to her, a layer of dirt and sweat that highlighted her face like rouge. Jack's skin was smooth all over, glassy, but this woman looked like she'd feel rough beneath his fingers.

Hiccup wanted suddenly to reach out touch her.

The Nightmare King's hand moved up over his back, cupped the nape of his neck. "Are you hungry?" he breathed.

Hiccup flinched. He couldn't help it. The tone was impossible to read, and a frightful glance at the Nightmare King's face only limited his options more. His expression gave nothing away.

Hungry...

The word had a meaning; he knew it did. He just wasn't sure what that meaning _was_. Jack was always happy with a _yes_, but Hiccup was practiced with Jack. Pitch was a mystery to him. There was a motive behind his questions, and risk in saying the wrong thing. Shamefully, he knew that although Jack insisted it was there, the Nightmare King's _like_ for him was a dull, decaying thing, and he had done so little to invest in it before. He felt blind before him, shuffling about in total darkness as surely as if Jack had sealed shadow over his eyes.

He didn't realize he was holding his breath again until Pitch spoke once more, just a touch softer and with a fondness that made his chest tighten. "It's not a trick question, pet."

I don't know, Hiccup thought, but his head tipped in assent despite himself. It was an instinctual nod, but the saliva beginning gather beneath his tongue suggested it was the correct answer even if his brain was too useless to explain why.

"Yes or no?" Pitch prompted politely.

Please, Hiccup thought, _**please**_

But you didn't say '_please_' to the Nightmare King. Hiccup wet his lips anxiously. Took a breath. Tried again. Pitch was patient, watching him all the while.

Finally, it came, small and flat but thankfully lacking the stammer; "Yes."

"Yes, what?"

The golden sand above the woman's head shifted. Now there was a human shape on the Nadder's back, and braided hair that fanned in imaginary winds.

"Yes, I'm hungry." Hiccup whispered obediently through numb lips.

She dreaming of flight. It was exactly as Hiccup had imagined it would be. The Nightmare Realm was wide, and Toothless could fly short distances within it, so Hiccup rode on his back sometimes, clutching very tightly for fear of falling. The disconnection with the ground made his stomach twist, which in turn only upset Toothless, and so usually he walked instead.

But for the dreaming stranger, this disconnection was totally fearless. The woman's mouth was curving unknowingly into a smile as her dream of Nadder's wings stretched to full mast, balancing serenely in the spaces above her head. The tiny golden replica on its back stretched her hands out in delight, reaching for...

...clouds. Yes. Hiccup imagined her fingers were dipping into the bellies of passing clouds.

Something within him stirred at the thought.

Pitch's hand plucked his wrist up and lifted it, guiding, guiding, until his outstretched fingers were hovering just in front of the dreamsand pair. The sandy dragon was larger, but the shape of the woman he thought he could fit within the palm of his hand...

It was as if time had suspended him, so close and yet so far...and then Pitch's grip on his wrist urged his hand forward, so that the very tip of his finger touched her golden heart.

A gasp broke through the air. Not Hiccup's voice - the woman's. The real woman, asleep in her bed. The peaceful curve of her smile became a grimace, and suddenly the sandy shape of the dragon was dissolving, crumbling away like falling dust as the dreamsand vision of her stood suspended for a moment, shock-still.

A stain of blackness spread from the fixed point where Hiccup's finger had connected. It swallowed her dream like a sickness- torso, arms, legs, the pretty sweep of her plaited hair - until finally the golden glow was rotted completely, leaving only a trembling human-shaped mass of nightmare sand beneath his touch. And he was touching her, in a way...her dream. Her nightmare. It was just as grainy as he'd imagined.

A taste of fear filled his throat, sickly sweet and pooling saliva in his mouth.

Copper, earth, sticky drops of fresh honey. More, more. Hiccup pressed the knuckles of his free hand suddenly between his lips. She was looking around, the figure of nightmare sand...terror made her movements stiff, unnatural...and then a black line appeared abruptly, sticking out from her shoulder blades -

An arrow...?_

Lightening-fast another struck, directly above the first. He could almost hear the meaty thwack in his head. Fear bubbled from the first impact, flooded him by the second. Beneath her nightmare, the blonde woman made a weak sound of alarm and clutched her blankets tighter.

A new noise swelled upon the air, a groan - not the woman's voice this time, but his own. His stomach was twisting, jaw tilted as he sipped at the air...somehow he could almost feel it, the weight of terror in his mouth...a flavor...

...a good flavor...

"What's he doing?" Jack interrupted sharply, eyes bright and excited.

"Oral fixation." Pitch supplied calmly. Hiccup could feel his amber gaze fixed upon him as steadily as ever. The fingers on his neck shifted lazily, toying with the shorter hairs at his nape. "An understandable line to blur...you remember feeding with your mouth." he added to Hiccup in a velvet aside.

Humiliation flooded him suddenly - was he doing something wrong? - but then a third arrow struck the nightmare sand, square in the woman's chest, and the sudden burst of fear that filled him washed over the shame. Hiccup gulped uselessly, swallowed only empty air,

whined-

"_Wow..._" Jack breathed out, grinning despite himself.

"It will pass."

"I dunno..." The Prince adjusted his weight, cheek pressed to his staff dreamily as he took in the display. "I kinda _like_ it...it's _cute_."

Her eyes were moving very fast behind the closed lids, brows contorted as she struggled through the vision in her head. Pitch's grip pulled him back out of reach of the nightmare just as the strong lines began to go falter...weakening? Waking? The catch of Hiccup's breath was audible - _no_, he thought, and _please_- with an entirely different inflection than before. _Gone_, so _soon_, and he still wanted _more -_

"Easy." Pitch whispered to him. "Slowly."

Okay..._okay_...he could do this. Yes. _Easy._ Hiccup closed his eyes, willing his frantic heart to calm.

For a long moment there was only darkness, the drone of Pitch's silent approval, and that overwhelmingly addictive taste of the blonde woman's fear.

When he opened them again, they were outside of her room.

Blue-black darkness cloaked the air. Silver light. The moon. Not a touch of nightmare sand followed them out - _did she wake up?_ Hiccup wondered suddenly. His head was spinning. A ripple passed through him, realization - they hadn't stayed to see what color her eyes were.

...it...

...it wasn't important.

There was a fullness inside him now. A weight to his steps, like the lingering drug of sleep. He was aware quite suddenly that his fingers had found their way into his mouth, pushed past his lips during the feeding. A knuckle was fitted beneath his teeth, sore from...chewing? Sucking? They came back wet when he tugged them free again.

Jack was watching him very closely.

"What _was_ that?" Hiccup rasped before he could stop himself, and colored quickly at the volume of his own voice. He turned to the moon nervously, wetting his lips as the silence stretched on. "That was...I don't...?"

"Fresh fear." Jack supplied, his sights lingering still on the glossy sheen of Hiccup's mouth. "Not bad for your first meal, huh?"

'Not bad' couldn't even begin to cover it. Hiccup pressed his fingers back to his mouth, as if trying to keep that rare and delectable taste from spilling back out. Yellow hair washed in running water, honey-sweet milk, the rusted tip of an arrowhead between his teeth-

It circled back to him at once - _your first meal_ - and suddenly the world of Above seemed just as impossibly large as the Nightmare Realm itself.

"There's _more?_" he whispered thickly around his fingers.

Jack raised his eyebrows at Pitch and grinned.

Hiccup could hardly believe it. It was almost beyond comprehension, that such a place had existed for so long. That this ability to feel _full_ had existed for so long, suspended in the unknown beyond his tiny cage. Memories of Jack returning home with Pitch at his side, staff in hand, and a horde of accompanying Nightmares surfaced fresh in his brain. Their sense of renewed energy, of _satisfaction_, suddenly made sense.

Jack was right, he realized.

It was a lot to take in.

Above was a sturdy place, misted in sea-spray and wide open to the portrait of the night sky. There were hills rather than staircases, houses rather than hives. Some of them were in states of mid-construction while others appeared gloriously new. Here and there he caught the tail ends of golden trails of sand, vanishing around corners like fallen breadcrumbs. Visible, but not enough to light their surroundings the way they had before. The colors appeared dulled without that strong golden glow, but where the stars cast rays of silver Hiccup could see rainbows of painted surfaces: green, blue, orange and yellow. And red, shades upon shades of it, from bright cherry to bloody scarlet to the smoldering embers of Hiccup's most familiar nightmares.

In the distance were the milky heads of tired sheep. Wells that held water. Stables. Hiccup could make out the outline of a few familiar shapes, hunched backs, folded wings.

"It's a /buffet./" Jack was saying, looking between Pitch and Hiccup eagerly. "Wait till you you scare the twins, Hic, now _that's_ a trip. Dinner and Desert!"

"One is enough." Pitch interrupted silkily. "For tonight." They walked in the dark corners, and where their feet fell, the shadows only thickened. Pitch was a phantom in Hiccup's field of vision, but Jack he could see before him clearly. He moved like a predator, hands readied and comfortable around his staff, a natural grace to his hunter's steps.

They must have been just outside the woman's house, then. Maybe she hadn't woken up after all, because as far as his masters were concerned, there was no need to watch the doorways for any sign of her. Hiccup tore his eyes from the frame reluctantly and focused instead over the stable closest, where a larger shape was sleeping.

Fretfully.

Jack caught the twitch of an elegant wing and stilled in his shade. Hiccup felt an order strum within his core, echoing in the buzzing

wake of Pitch's command: _wait._

And for a minute's time they did nothing _but_ wait. The sleeping dragon pawed restlessly at the ground. Lifted its head sightlessly. A crooning whine came from her throat, low and deep. Like Toothless, a powerful rumble, but vastly different - a different heart, a different creature-

Deadly Nadder, Hiccup thought again, and with the thought came a spell of sudden joy. Of _course_. And the restless shake of her head - of course, yes. In his mind's eye he could still see the bird-like dragon as it was in the woman's dream, wings stretched out to drift upon the open skies and spiky tail bobbing for balance.

He moved before he could even begin to think about the consequences, as if it were the most natural and obvious thing in the world to do, and by the time the silent drone of their hold over him had shifted to encompass _surprise_, Hiccup's hand was already poised to touch the waking dragon's snout.

No, wait...not his snout. Nadders liked -

...um...

His fingers hovered for a moment, thoughtful and still. And then they shifted, slid, brushed just so along the leftmost curve of the Nadder's jaw, in that space that was most difficult for them to scratch themselves-

The sleepy, dreaming whine melded seamlessly into a comfortable purr.

"There you go!" Hiccup laughed happily. "You like that, huh?" His fingers touched the dip just below her throat, that soft spot he could curl his fingers into just right, and a pleased sigh rippled through the dragon's bright body accordingly. White scales, silver, yellow and blue...Hiccup nuzzled his head beneath the Nadder's just as he had with Toothless and smiled at the tired, welcoming sound that greeted him.

"Back to sleep, girl..."

The dragon felt like she was shuddering, uselessly trying to make her body cooperate and stay upright. Soon she couldn't manage even that.

("Hiccup!")

Her head tucked itself limply on top of folded claws. Hiccup smoothed his hands over, and over and over, and willed her to rest well. She'd need a good recharge, after all that flying...

"_Hiccup!_" Jack hissed again. Hiccup felt a hand grab him around the bicep. The indignant surprise faded quickly from the Prince's expression, eyes narrowing as he fixed both hands back around his staff and prodded the Nadder's limp body experimentally with the crook. The dragon's bright scales rose and fell in soft snores beneath his inspection.

Another prod, this one more insistent.

"...I don't believe it." Jack sputtered out, laughing. "You put it to sleep!" The tense outline of his shoulders melted immediately into relief. "How?" Chilly fingers scooped up his hands, pouring over the pads of his fingers with such excitement, it was as if he expected gems to pour from his open palms. "How? You just touched that dragon and it fell right over...!"

"It's - it's nothing." Hiccup started, blinking, but Jack was steering him quickly back again, away from the dragon, into the range of Pitch's curiously wide eyes. "It's-"

And then the Nightmare King was taking his hands and he was very still, inside and out. Pitch stroked the back of his hands thoughtfully, slipped the pads of his fingers along the inside of his palm. Whatever he seemed to sense, it was more than Hiccup had expected. It lifted the corners of his mouth, softened the unforgiving cut of his glassy eyes. The stroking fingers over sensitive skin shifted from an clinical inspection to an appraising pet.

"Sleep paralysis." he said , more to himself than to Hiccup or Jack. "You've drugged the beast."

Hiccup mouthed at the air, soundless. There was a way that the Nadder had moved, but...it seemed so natural, even if it was a little more sluggish than he had expected. Like something he'd seen before, in a dream. In a memory. "It's just a scratch behind the ears." he muttered nervously, glancing frightfully at Jack as if waiting for extra confirmation. "They like it...?"

"I'm sure they do." Pitch assured him sweetly. "Just as much as they like to rest, I should think." It was surreal, how calm he sounded. Hiccup knew, beyond his own instinct, that it was uncalled for to have moved out of their range so suddenly, without their direction. But despite that, miraculously, the Nightmare King seemed pleased with him. "Did you drain its energy, I wonder...?"

Hiccup didn't know what to say. Pitch traced one linger finger along the creases of his palms, as if following an invisible threads. Distantly, he could hear Jack muttering something. Giggling. There were sounds, faint little taps as if he were going back to toying with the sleeping Nadder. Drugged, Pitch said. She certainly wasn't sleeping lightly anymore, if she could sleep through that. A faint rustling - Jack lifting his wings, maybe. Peering underneath.

"I don't know..." Hiccup started uselessly.

"Do you feel stronger?"

"N-no." Another swallow. His stomach remained pleasantly full, but that fear-taste was beginning to ebb from his mouth already. Hiccup bit the inside of his cheek. "Sorry, I - she was waking up...I thought I'd let her sleep?"

A crackling sound of ice broke through, followed by a thud. Jack was laughing wickedly, a bounce in his step when he re-appeared at Hiccup's side. "You thought that was good? You should see him on that Night Fury, Pitch. Let him have a proper test drive. What did I tell you? Isn't he a prize? Fireballs, loop-de-loops...believe me,

you'll see!" "

A hand brushed his cheek again. The backs of his fingers.

A caress.

"I do see." Pitch said, and smiled.

* * *

><p>He remembered clutching Toothless to him so tirelessly that his arms ached. There was a time when the reptilian rattle of his heart had been the only thing there to hold. He could not pinpoint when, or why, or how exactly he had managed to keep himself on his feet without the warmth of him there to cling to - all he could think was that he was here now.

It was all that was important.

Even so, it was always Toothless's center that reached him first. It made sense, of course - they had to be connected, or else Toothless would not have been so quick to catch him.

But if Hiccup considered himself new to Above, it was an entirely different matter for his friend. His pupils became knife-sharp at the first sniff of sea-salt air, wings tense, back hunched as if ready to fight. Hiccup could count his teeth in the blue dark, their inward curve highlighted by the watching moon.

It helped immensely that the image of dreamsand was so fresh in his memory. Hiccup kept the golden picture of the Deadly Nadder purposefully in mind as he tried his best to console Toothless. The Night Fury bowed his head, an automatic gesture to let him climb upon his back more easily. There was a harness there - a perfect fit. Jack had toyed with the idea of improving upon it once, but Toothless hadn't allowed him close to try.

He was glad, actually - he hardly trusted himself to handle the contraption for fear it might break. There was a part of the mechanism that Hiccup could fit his prosthetic foot into, and without it, Toothless could only manage small leaps at a time.

It was this he adjusted now. The sound of the metal peg slotting into place eased the tension from Toothless's frame, soothing out his sharp edges into graceful lines.

Pitch had taken them to an island with no houses, no sheep, no stables with folded wings resting with blissful ignorance inside. He did not wait in the moonlight where Hiccup could see him, only feel him there, a constant buzz in the back of his head. A chill from his hand that lingered against the side of his face.

"It's okay, buddy." Hiccup whispered absently under his breath, and Toothless tossed his head and shook out his wings as if to remind him that they were still securely attached. There was a particular, higher way he'd ride in the saddle when he was below ground and the most common form of flying was leaping between rocks, but the open air posed a different challenge, and more of a possibility of falling. Hiccup couldn't help but sink down low. His legs where they gripped tight around Toothless felt laughably weak.

The moon was very, very far away. Hiccup tried to forget the distance, tried to forget the eyes, and thought wistfully of what the milky surface might feel like under his hand.

Dreamsand, maybe.

Toothless understood. He crouched low to the ground, and his wings became open sails, and Hiccup curled his fingers in tight as they took off and thought again, _here goes_

And then the sky was spinning all around him, and Hiccup was shouting something, curling in tight with his head bowed and forehead pressed hard to Toothless's back. His stomach was down on the ground without him, and his voice was shrill on the air, and fire, _fire_, there was _so much **fire** - _

He was falling _up_

There was a positively feral _snap_ of a sound. And fear, bright and sharp and slamming through his center like the relentless clatter of a bell - his own fear, and layered passionately on top of that, Toothless's, surging up with protective fierceness in response. Hiccup felt the both of them jolt, then rock violently as something made impact beneath Toothless's claws. Back and forth, the weight of their bodies swaying. Hiccup couldn't muster the courage to open his eyes. Images flickered behind the closed lids rapidly - his hands behind his back, dark in his eyes, in his mouth, and Jack's giddy weight slamming into the side of the Canary's cage until it swung like pendulum on its suspended chain -

He could feel Toothless's horror, urgent and furious as his head whipped around, looking for the source of the fear - the _fire_, the _falling_

- they.

They weren't falling.

They were never falling.

They were swaying, still.

White-knuckled, Hiccup managed to ease one eye open.

What he saw wasn't fire after all. It was stars. _Thousands_ of them. And the white moon, and silver tufts of clouds, and leaves clinging to branches around them like scattered letters on the wind. They were in a tree, he realized abruptly. The swaying wasn't from a shaking cage, but Toothless landing hurriedly in the branches. He remained perched there, melded expertly into the darkness and hunched like a bird of prey.

With his heart in his mouth, Hiccup stared hard at the back of his head. He had seen this before...this exact sky. The very same stars. The sight of Toothless with his ears flicking, picking through the air for sounds that Hiccup couldn't detect. Exhilaration bubbled with him at the memory, a learned euphoria that surfaced naturally and chased away any remaining, senseless fear.

"I..." Hiccup started. "-sorry. Bud. I'm-" _Ready_, he thought, and this time he didn't have to say it. Toothless _felt_ it. His wings, when they stretched out again, were gentle. Cautious. The second takeoff was perfectly soft and straight. Hiccup tensed in the saddle, but he didn't close his eyes, and the fear didn't resurface.

They were only gliding. Like Jack on the wind, smooth and free. Toothless tilted his head back, gold burning eyes fixed hopefully on Hiccup. _Okay?_ they seemed to say, and Hiccup smiled back and eased up his death grip just so, enough to allow some comfort to creep in.

Okay, he thought.

His leg seemed to know what to do. It shifted and clicked when Toothless wanted to turn. Hiccup tried to move with him, following a basic understanding - lean your body this way, hold your foot that. They passed through a cloud, cool and misty, and then above where the colors of the night were rich and deep. Hiccup thought of the woman on the Nadder and eased up one hand to skim his fingers through the milky air.

A sound escaped him, soft and delighted. Toothless mirrored it happily back at him.

"What do you think, bud? Higher?"

And faster. Smoother. Toothless seemed to know just how far to push without frightening him, and soon Hiccup was laughing, shrieking with delight and urging him up and up. This must be what dreamsand felt like drifting through open air. His head was black, but his mind was shifting, glowing, _gold._

The moon sailed past them, a watching stranger.

And skipping past it, a silhouette of black against white, was Jack's shape.

He didn't need a dragon, of course. The wind had long since been his ally. Still, it awed him just how easily he could turn himself on the air, flitting about like a blue-black raven and idling in just the right light for Hiccup to make out the elation on his face. Then he tucked his arms back, staff and all, and rocketed down to join them with a whoop of joy.

He skimmed a corkscrew pattern around them, waving in encouragement. Mischievous. Hiccup had long since learned to tell when he wanted to play, and it was clear now in his language. Contagious, even - Hiccup grinned suddenly, strengthening his grip on Toothless and urging him with a burst of speed. Jack was fast, of course, but somehow he already knew that Toothless was much faster. They left him behind in an instant, Toothless with a daring rumble of a laugh and Hiccup chanting under his breath, _come on, come on!_

Sky, sky, beautiful, glorious, _open_ sky. Hiccup felt perfectly naked in it, swept up and blown back and tangled up in the spaces between the twinkling stars. Toothless shrieked something joyful and shot a blast of white-blue from his open jaws. It streaked far beyond them like a bullet and exploded suddenly-

"Wh/aaa-!/"

-and the Toothless dodged, and Hiccup's scream because a laugh - that was _close_, but gods, Thor above it was so, so _fun._ He thought he'd known Jack's love for games, but this was a whole new playing field, new rules, even an _advantage._

More fireballs, one-two-three-_ten_, lightening fast with the Night Fury playfully dodging the backlashes every time. Hiccup felt heat blast by him on the last circle past - the warmth was actually _pleasant_. Why was he so afraid of fire before? This wasn't even a red flame, he realized with sudden mirth. This was Toothless's fire, all pale energy and protective might. This was something that could never hurt him.

Jack took a shortcut, teleporting through the darkness ("thought you had me!" he shouted playfully as he streaked up to meet him,) and Hiccup changed positions, heard the solid _click!_ of the prosthetic adjusting Toothless's tail fin, and down they fell again towards the forested land, leaving Jack wide-eyed behind again. Hiccup actually saw him vanish completely into shadow like a creature made of water. The next second he was popping out from behind a tall pine, laughing loudly and kicking off the surface of the bark to rocket towards them.

His staff was at his side - not a threat, of course not - but then Hiccup stalled, and Toothless pressed forward, and their connection faltered flat in-between, lending just enough time to the limp tail fin to drop them suddenly a few yards in the air. Hiccup was halfway to screaming before instinct seemed to overtake him, tipping the two of them sideways into a clean barrel roll. Toothless's wings whipped out to break their fall.

And then they were touching down to earth again with panther-like grace, Toothless chortling low, Hiccup wind-swept and breathless. Jack came spiraling down not far from them, landing in an animal crouch and bringing with him star-bursts of frost crystals from where his feet slammed into the naked grass.

"_**Yeah!**_" he shouted, straightening in a rush with one fist thrown victoriously in the air. The staff came spinning down hard in the other, striking the ground in a purposeful blow that sent long, icy streaks of ice across the terrain. He looked wild, untamed like the eye of a self-made storm. "_**Hah!**_" - now _that_ was fun, Hiccup!"

He turned quickly on his heel, searching, searching, and then his eyes found a place in the darkness and he rushed towards it suddenly, laughing, "Did you _see!?!_"

A set of white teeth gleamed from the gloom. And there was Pitch, arms open, hands reaching out suddenly to take either side of Jack's face, and -

"Jack, my boy!" he laughed. Hiccup had never heard him laugh quite like that before. It was a dark and terrifying sound, as if their flight had actually left him _excited._ "My beautiful, _wicked_ boy-"

For a moment there was only Jack's face, wide-eyed and pressing in

eagerly close. Then Pitch folded to meet him and the negative spaces between them were all erased. He broke away grinning, his hands on Jack's shoulders, but Jack was already burning up to meet him again, saying _I told you, I told you!_ and _isn't he something? I was right, wasn't I? _-

And, "_Yes._"

Kisses. Laughter. Hiccup had never seen them like this. He had never seen much of them together at all. It had always been his cage before, just himself and Jack and the bars all around them, and then it was Toothless, Toothless, Toothless. Jack and the moon. Jack and all the imprints of the Nightmare King's watchful eyes. But never the two of them set aside and visible like this, gripping each other tight as if Hiccup wasn't there to witness them.

He wasn't sure if he should be looking closer or looking away. There was a ghost sensation of hands on his face, eyes on his body, and Pitch's laughter was burning away inside him, turning the buzz in his brain to a deafening roar.

Hiccup bent to encircle his arms around Toothless's neck. The dragon's heat seared strong against his own chest, centering him again. And with that clarity, the dawning recognition of their aftermath

- they were happy. They were _pleased._ Somehow, despite all the tripping and blind fumbling in the dark, he had crash-landed on the exact target that made his masters _proud._

He remained smiling helpless and silent as the Nightmare King whispered secrets words to his Prince. And then he was gone again, cloaked by the night's shadow, and Jack was at his side saying "That's a wrap, Hic!"

He didn't need to be told to close his eyes this time.

It was only a little different returning to the Nightmare Realm on Toothless rather than in Jack's arms. The touchdown was smoother, the fall slightly cleaner, and the change in air seemed a little less surprising considering the altitudes they had just climbed through moments before. When he opened his eyes again it was just him and his dragon blinking back to reality.

There was cold in the air, still - Jack couldn't have gone too far. Hiccup found himself suddenly and selfishly glad.

There was someone he wanted a moment to celebrate with, too.

Hiccup slid off the saddle to meet Toothless, nearly tripping in his haste. There was a barely contained energy surging through the Night Fury still, shifting all through his wings and tickling the shape of his ears. His tail swung back and forth, tongue darting out to flick eagerly over the air.

"Buddy-" he started, but Toothless surged forward up into him before he could finish, nudging his great black head beneath Hiccup's arms. His purrs were deep and adoring, content. Hiccup felt as if he were drowning in them. They vibrated against his open palms, buzzing through his skin and into his blood like a forbidden language only

they could understand.

They pressed their foreheads together, as easy and synchronized a motion as any instinctual adjustment of a prosthetic leg to prosthetic fin. Hiccup's jaw was aching from the force of his smiles. His lips found Toothless's cheek, his snout, the corner of his gold-bright eye, chaste but unquestionably loving. And grateful, so, so grateful that his best friend was here with him, where no one could ever take him away-

Toothless licked his cheek, tousling up the already tousled hair. Hiccup could feel the energy burning off him slowly, and the take of spent muscles beginning to ache. "You tired, huh?" he cooed, soaking up his attentions like nourishment. "You had a good time?" Hiccup rubbed his softer cheek against a rough, scaly one, laughing as the dragon wriggled and writhed happily against him. "...me too, bud! Me too...I can't wait to do it again...gotta sleep first though, Toothless, rest up..."

A thick, wet tongue lapped at his cheek once more. Hiccup licked him right back, burst into laughter when Toothless tried to shake it off in unexpected surprise, ears flicking. He couldn't stop smiling. It hung there on his face long after the dragon's heartbeat had slowed itself into slumber, long after his own mind went soft and hazy and pleasantly blank within the safety of his other half's company.

He couldn't remember having even survived without knowing this heartbeat was in touching distance. Couldn't even recall properly what his mind had been like without him - it felt like a blank page misplaced in Jack's diary. The memory of laying on his back, listening to Toothless's voice from afar and wanting and wanting -

And then getting. And Jack's relieved laughter, and Pitch's awed smile, and the Valhalla's grace of their approval.

Hiccup turned his head hopefully, looking for a shape of black against black, ferns of frost to contrast the inky shadow. He wasn't sure how long Jack had been watching, exactly, with Toothless so thoroughly distracted by him, and himself so thoroughly distracted by Toothless...but he was here now, seated on very end of a slab of rock and lounging as still as stone.

Hiccup felt cool stone beneath his feet, the warmth of Toothless's scales beneath his palm, and the phantom sensations of Jack's hands around his waist. Trailing over his thighs. Nestled in the Prince's lap like a crown jewel, his favorite plaything, the seat of honor in the Fearling Prince's court.

Jack must have been thinking along the same lines. The pulse in his center was hungry, and the open spaces around him were a clear invitation. His elbows were propped against rock, hands hanging loosely, legs were kicked out carelessly and crossed at the ankle. There was a need there, in the expectant way he waited. A sudden urge to stumble for him, as Hiccup had made such a habit of when Jack was in his mood. Fall at his feet, and whine, and beg, and rush to have them joined again, to make sense of all those things that had felt so blurry before...

...they didn't feel so blurry, now.

Hiccup stood, slowly, purposefully, with a grace he hadn't known he was capable of. There was a bizarre delight in the simplicity and power of the movement, the subtle changes he could invoke within. Natural seduction. A different composure to the shadow on him. They lay weighted and drippy, clinging to him like hungry hands. He felt like a creature born of tar, fearlessly rising to offer himself to his master.

...and why would he fear, anyway? He had Toothless now. And he had his master's pride, and Jack - glorious, _merciful_ Jack with his book full of secret pleasures. All the things Hiccup had spent so long learning and could present to him anew.

He took a step, careful to mind the bad leg, reaching at the neckline of his shadow robe as he moved. His eyes never left Jack's as he slipped his fingers beneath the hem and shrugged the robe from his shoulders, leaving it to dissolve into sulfurous foam around his waist and ankles.

And he could feel it so _clearly_, Jack's wanting him. Even as his eyes never left Hiccup's, he could feel how they drank in every inch of him with that same cannibalistic desire that had surged through him when he had watched the halo of gold from the Above world morph itself into delectable black. It brought a wetness back beneath his tongue, parted his lips in anticipation - the thought of being devoured similarly, of Jack corrupting him, pulling him apart apart piece by piece to fit between his teeth.

Step, step, step, until he was too close to walk any further, and there was no closer he could get except to climb over, straddle his lap and press himself within the welcome home of his open arms. Jack's hands fit themselves easily around his hips, sliding upwards over his sides, his chest, his throat. Hiccup felt a chilly palm cup his cheek and turned into it with relish.

"I..." he started, so softly it was hardly audible.
"..._you_..."

"Me." Jack said, looking up at him with such desire that even the shadow around him seemed to burn.

"...you _saved_ me..."

"...yeah." The hand shifted, thumb adjusting to caress a cheekbone.
"Yeah, I did. It took you long enough to figure that out, huh?"

There was so much more to say. But he hadn't the words, or the grace to use them, and Jack's grip around his center was squeezing, wanting, wanting, _wanting_, and Hiccup thought, at last, that he had the clarity of mind to properly give.

Jack didn't seem alarmed when he pushed himself back to stand. His legs uncrossed at the ankle, knees parting so that Hiccup could kneel between them. The Prince's shadow robe didn't dissolve, even as Hiccup had nothing left to expose. His eyes were wide with awe and strangely vulnerable, as if he were watching a coveted dream unfold.

Had they always been like that...? Maybe it was Hiccup's fault for not noticing - maybe he had just never looked so closely, before.

In adoration, Hiccup touched the shadows of Jack's legs, then bent to touch his lips to his left knee. And again, at his shin. Jack's skin was like gleaming silver swathed beneath black, the value of which had had been all too blind to understand. Now it was like coming home again, with a sticking point to ground him - he was so lucky, so very lucky for what his masters gave him - the black sky, the stars, Toothless -

He placed kisses along the fit swell of his calf, all the way down to his ankles and instep. His feet. His master giggled something under his breath and stretched out his toes as Hiccup worked his way back up. He nuzzled the inside of his thigh between kisses, a silent declaration of love amongst a sea of 'thank you's'.

Jack's chortle became something soft and waiting.

When Hiccup pressed a worshipping kiss to base of his cock, he barely even breathed.

It was such a new concept to him, daring to tease his owner like this. Jack's satisfaction in the light of it was a territory that had never been explored. Curiosity. Approval. It felt so strange to be gifted with this permission, this freedom. Pride swelled within him as he traced licked a wet stripe up the underside, breathed out against the sensitive skin. Jack gave a throaty groan when fit the damp head against the fold of his tongue.

"...geez, Hic..."

He felt so full. Full from the nightmares. Fuller and fuller himself at the feedback of satisfying his master actively, in this languid way he had never tried before, as if they had all the time in the world -

Or until Toothless woke up.

But it was fine - I'll keep quiet, Hiccup thought happily, opening his mouth to take Jack inside. He had - everything. He had everything he could ever want. He had the freedom of flight tucked away inside his heart. He had a ground beneath his knees that he wasn't cracked and bleeding out against, a soul mate that caught him within the embrace of leathery wings and would catch him a thousand times over, a sky that welcomed him back like an old friend. He had 'I love you' and 'very good' and a lover that lounged back on his elbows and let him repay him as he liked. He had affection he could feel, as if it were a physical thing unto itself, a layer of invisible clothing snug against his own skin...

And he could feel it. He could feel Jack filling up his throat, bitter and cold on his tongue, the chilly fingers ruffling the shorter hairs at the nape of his neck. He could feel Jack's breath hitch when he hollowed out his cheeks, his throaty "ohhhh" when when he sank down to take him to the root.

...why had he never thought to do this before?

"You...had a good time, huh...?" Jack teased breathlessly, and now

his tone had a _rumble_. Hiccup pressed a hand over his belly to feel it twitch beneath his palm and hummed a note of agreement low in his throat, where the Prince was sure to feel it vibrate. The delighted giggle he earned in return sent sparks skipping down his spine.

There was no grip forcing his head still while Jack thrust in, just his own hands braced along the pale line of his hips, the pleasant stillness in his brain as he focused all attention on his task, drawing beads of sweat to collect on wintery skin. Jack's knuckles brushed his cheek, much in the same way Pitch had touched him. They trailed softly down the side of his face down to his chin, collecting some of the wetness dribbling there.

"..._wow_, you...Hic, that's _good_...you're doing so _good_~..."

..._so good_...

He was a book again, and Jack was turning the pages. He had forgotten how fulfilling it was to be an open spine and papery sheets, to feel the pressure of words scratched into his skin, a thousand tiny focal points to bury himself within. Jack's ice opening him up from the inside, Toothless's heart beating steady in his chest, Pitch's power plucking wires in the back of his head, saying _go on, go on_...

And on. And on, until he could hear the telling sounds that spilled from his lips when he was getting close. Sure enough, there were soon hands back in his hair, gripping to jerk him onto his cock into a more forceful rhythm. When the building hit it's breaking point, they fisted tight, shoving him down his length and holding firmly in place. Hiccup traced encouraging circles over his skin and swallowed him down gratefully all the while.

Valhalla...

There was a moment in which neither of them seemed quite willing to move. Jack's hands were loose again. His breath began to even out. So Hiccup straightened slowly, easing his spent cock out from between his lips, and shifted to curl blissfully against Jack's chest.

There was a hand back in his hair, soon enough. Petting. It didn't pull at all, but Hiccup could still feel the prickling pain through his scalp, the lingering sting in the backs of his eyes. His knees were aching from their long, bare contact stone. His throat was throbbing, sore.

"I'm pretty sure I've never been this happy in my life." Hiccup heard himself whisper into the dark.

"...you haven't, no."

"...okay. Thank you..." The corner of his mouth quirked upwards. "Thank you, for summing that up..."

Jack laughed very suddenly, as if this were a particular, private joke. Hiccup felt like laughing a little, himself.

At last the sound of his breathing seemed to shift and growl and separate, until it was very clearly not Jack rumbling at him this

time, but a very tired dragon just beginning to blink back awake.

...aaaand there's Toothless, not a moment too soon, Hiccup thought wryly, and untangled himself from Jack's arms.

He _was_ very tired. The way Toothless called for him, he seemed to know that as well. And there was a place beneath his wing, open and inviting, where Hiccup couldn't resist curling up and letting one warm paw close around him to keep him safe in the night.

"...Hiccup?" Jack gaped, pushing himself unsteadily to his feet.

Toothless nudged him once when he got close again and sniffed him over suspiciously. The rough nose wrinkled in distaste, but he folded his great head back down to rest once he seemed to have decided there was nothing _fearful_ about the new scents upon him. Hiccup tucked himself beneath a wing and let the sound of the dragon's mighty heart lull him back into serenity.

There was plenty of room in his embrace. Room for Jack, too. But Jack wasn't making any move to join them; he was staring at Toothless strangely, as if he had only just remembered he was there.

Hiccup picked a note of discord from his master's tense frame. It clenched around his heart, a bitter, winter fury. But before he could move to correct it, Jack was gone, turned on his heel and melted back into the shadow. The curious imprint of his face lingered like the moon, aftershocks behind closed eyelids, too strange and distorted to analyze in it's entirety. He watched it until it faded, until there was nothing left to see expect the darkness, and nothing left to feel expect the weight of his best friend holding him.

He dreamed again lying on a bed of ash, with tongues of flame that crept close only to be frightened away by Toothless's growl.

When he woke again, the ache had subsided from his scalp entirely.

* * *

><p>Hiccup watched the Nightmares and fearling wisps come and go like pulls of the tide. Pitch's horses, skeletal and twisted in ever-changing bands of onyx sand, came and went through their favorite chambers of the hives in various states of solidity. Some nights, when he could only assume Pitch and Jack had left to feed alone, they would return renewed with energy, their cries reverberating within the cavernous confines in throngs of triumphant power. Hiccup imagined he could sense the fear on them, a lingering taste that he could lick from his fingers in thoughtless envy as he tried to recall phantom sensations of satisfaction in his stomach, flavor in his mouth.<p>

He spent hours underground on Toothless's back, crossing higher distances in short leaps at a time and taking meticulous note of the movements required for his prosthetic to sync properly with the red fin. In the hollow spaces of the Nightmare realm, adrift on the din of screaming silence, he could not seem to re-create the seamless way he had maneuvered the mechanism as he had in the skies of

Above.

When Jack returned, he did not mention the sky, or the persistent want to feed again. Toothless seemed to understand his hunger on some level. He tired himself with snapping at the air around them in a mockery of catching fish from a teeming river.

When Toothless slept, Jack plucked him from his feet and turned him against a wall so that his stomach was pressed to the stone. His fingers found Hiccup's hair, and his mouth found his throat, and Hiccup hissed and mewled and tried to find some semblance of an order to follow as the sting of fang teeth took their time branding themselves into his skin. There was a suggestion of hips grinding against his back, friction through the barely-there shadow. Jack dragged his tongue over the bleeding spots, marked fresh bruises over the fading until Hiccup's mind was burning with it, the litany of _want, need, yours._

He tried to arch himself into Jack's hands, presenting himself as invitingly as possible.

When Jack left him there, he waited there for some time, uncertain if he was going to return.

In a way it had been easier when there were bars around him and there was no where to go besides his ten paces of steel. Hiccup pressed his cheek to the stone wall, focused as best he could on the pain of the fang collar singed into his neck until he could no longer remember how long he had been waiting. He thought, maybe, he should seek him out and apologize, but he wasn't sure what to apologize for. And besides, Jack seemed happy just marking him like that, and he might not be happy with a needless apology.

So he waited, and waited, and eventually Toothless found him and perched by his side to wait with him, smiling at him hopefully with a mouth full of pointed white teeth. Hiccup mimed a toothy grin back at him, batted a hand when Toothless batted a paw, and soon they were laughing and play-fighting themselves into an exhausted heap.

Toothless spent the afternoon sniffing at his neck and the copper smell of blood prickling faintly at the surface where Jack had bit him. He watched Hiccup for a long time with questioning eyes, studying the exact inflection of his smile.

* * *

><p>The next time he was brought Above, Toothless was not brought with him.<p>

Pitch told Jack to lead the way and did not say another word. Hiccup could feel him long after he stopped seeing him, lurking just out of sight, as powerful and ever-present as the waxing moon.

He thought there was a chance they'd find the woman with the yellow hair again. Hiccup kept that silent hope tucked away in his heart - he had liked her face, her pink cheeks and almond eyes. He had liked her wispy dream of riding on the back of a Deadly Nadder. And he had liked her _fear_, so sweet and bright and fresh; it had stayed with him long after, fueling him with secret energy.

But Jack didn't take him to the Nadder's house. Outside the hut they approached instead, a great blood-red dragon was resting. It was, at a glance, at least three times the size of Toothless. It's wingspan was incredible to behold, even folded as it was in sleep. Hiccup could not seem to regard it without imagining it's brilliant body cloaked in a wreath of flame, spitting gold and amber as it's razor claws dug fiercely into the soft earth...

"Monstrous Nightmare." The name was tugged from nowhere. Jack grinned, ruffled his hair and brought him in for a closer look. This dragon was fast asleep, not even stirring as the Nadder had been, although Jack insisted that he drug it just to make sure.

So Hiccup ran his hands over the rough, beautiful scales and thought, _rest well, you deserve it._

If he concentrated, he could almost picture the power Pitch claimed was there sleeping within his hands. The quiet, steady lull of hypnagogia, gently tugging the dragon's mind further and further into helpless slumber.

No dreamsand floated above the its head. Maybe this was a theme with dragons. Or, more likely, there was just no need for it. The great chest rose and fell, exhausted but perfectly comfortable. Hiccup counted the breaths just to make sure. In, out, in...

It's whole shape was different...made for different flight. Different battles. The long, sharp claws for trapping prey, the mouth perfect for biting close-rang. And imagine such a creature breathing fire? How big that must be? How _powerful?_ It frightened him as much as it fascinated him, and Hiccup found himself strangely glad it was sleeping. Or at least, that it was sleeping while Toothless wasn't here to protect him.

And then Jack said, "Ready?" and Hiccup nodded back, "Ready," and they were both stepping in shadow, navigating unseen within the house connected to the dragon's stable.

There was a man inside, sleeping with no dreamsand above his head. A Viking helmet was propped up on his headstand, boxy and rusted. The horns on either side were in the shape of a ram. Jack spared him a glance, considering, before tugging Hiccup through the shadows to the upper level, where a much older man was resting.

He was built like a battleship, with muscular arms tossed out across the lumpy bed in slumber. "His father," Jack supplied, nodding downstairs. "Brother of the Chief. He always dreams the same thing, wait and see..."

They waited until a thread of golden sand trickled above his head and formed an meaningless shape. Then Jack put a finger to his lips, adjusted his weight carefully as if considering his options, and _dropped_ into the shadow so suddenly that Hiccup found himself reeling back in surprise.

For a moment it seemed the room was empty, with only Hiccup, the Chief's sleeping brother, and the gloom to keep him company. The dreamsand slowly began to change, arranging itself into a sail, fluttering in the wind...and beneath that, a long, thin shape...

A boat...

The gold sand bubbled beneath it in the shape of waves as the old man gave a sigh of content. And then Jack's white smile broke through the dark behind his bed, and the shadows of the room began to stretch and turn, shifting in circles like a turning wheel.

Hiccup shrunk back against the wall despite himself. He felt strangely naked, with Jack so far out of his reach. If the man woke up, the first thing he would see might be Hiccup himself. The thought was enough to freeze him, stilling every muscle as he willed himself to blend in with the darkness and hide.

Jack's fingers ticked along the headboard like the restless legs of an insect. Where his hands touched, frost chilled the wood and shadows extended, taking claim over the room. One of them in particular shuddered and darkened, forming into the shape of a person. Tall, thick, with hair tugged back into twin tails...she seemed about the same size as the man, if not a little shorter. Jack tipped his head this way and that, adjusting the shadow puppet as he liked. Details emerged slowly; armor pads for her shoulders. Water dripping from her hunched frame. He shot Hiccup a secretive smile, nearly bouncing in place with his excitement, and then fell through the darkness again where Hiccup could no longer discern him.

The shadow of the woman grew suddenly darker. Her fingers twitched once, twice, feeling out the new form...

It was so real, that shape of her...

And then her mouth split open, the shadows receding to form the negative imprint of Jack's hungry smile, and Hiccup realized quite suddenly what was happening. Just as Pitch praised his paralysis, Jack had special tricks of his own up his sleeve. Hiccup couldn't see him because he was invisible, and his hiding spot wasn't just the darkness, but his own illusions.

The shadow-puppet stretched a heavy, water-weighted arm out and opened her - Jack's - mouth. The voice that bled through was most certainly not Jack. It wasn't human, but it wasn't a fearling's lilt, either. The tone was shrill, sobbing, choked with water and gargling upon the air like a living nightmare.

"H-el..p...-"

The dreamsand above the sleeping man's head reacted instantly. It flinched back in confusion, the glittering golden shape of the peaceful ship flicking this way and that as if caught by a sudden storm. Blackness began to spread through, from the tips of the sails down to the wooden shell.

The man groaned loudly, his slack hands clenching into fists. Hiccup could see his face beginning to contort with horror and grief.

"Drown..ing...!" Jack's shadow gasped out. The man's teeth were bared. A high, thin sound was escaping him, as if he was trying to wail but in his terror had forgotten exactly how. The newly-turned nightmare sand above his head re-shaped itself so that holes appeared

in the sturdy sail, the waves crashing higher and higher...

"_D...ar...ling..._"

Hiccup felt like his chest was beginning to constrict. He could taste the fear upon the air, but it was a dulled and curious thing, and Jack seemed to be receiving the bulk of it anyway. He could tell by the way his shadow-skin darkened, the pleased lilt to his mockery of a woman's voice. His wife, Hiccup thought suddenly. It was supposed to be the man's wife...

And then Jack's hand, his real hand, closed suddenly around Hiccup's wrist and tugged him into the dark.

He was blind for a moment, stumbling. Jack didn't teleport the way Pitch did. His momentum was quick and chaotic. When they re-appeared outside again, it was only Jack that was able to right himself gracefully. Energy coursed through him, bright in the manic laughter that burst from him in spades.

"I don't understand." Hiccup rasped once Jack's euphoria had died down into cheerful, ecstatic smiles.

"'Course...you weren't there." Jack sobered up, clapping a hand on his shoulder. "...he could have saved her, you know? So much for the Brother of a Chief. He just watched." He wiped at his eyes for a moment, chortling. "What a guy. What a keeper."

There was something hidden within his tone. Bitterness. Contempt. Hiccup slid his own hand over Jack's grip on his shoulder, rubbing soothing circles around his knuckles.

The Prince's smile softened considerably.

"Didja get a taste?"

"Just a little." He admitted shyly.

"Let's hit up his son, he's not so bad. Kind of a wimp if you ask me, but." Jack shrugged, trailing off to give his cheek a playful pinch. He caught his nose when Hiccup wrinkled it, tweaking the very end to earn himself a sputter, and then he smiled, a radiant, glowing smile Hiccup couldn't help but smile back into.

"What do you say, cutie?" he cackled, nuzzling their noses together sweetly. "You wanna scare the wimp?-"

"-_who's that?_" came a frazzled voice from behind him.

A hand, far too warm to belong to Pitch or Jack, touched his shoulder, then jerked sharply back. Fear filled the air, thick and strong. It didn't belong to Jack. It didn't belong to a fearling.

And then; "_Hiccup?_"

There was no time to think. Hiccup tensed and whipped around to face their company.

What he witnessed instead was a clip of Jack's frosted black hair,

and the blur of his foot as it rounded between them and threw the voice's owner off balance. Whoever it was was shorter than him and twice as stocky - Hiccup had a moment to marvel at the difference in size before the crook of Jack's staff looped around the stranger's neck and hooked him abruptly to the ground.

"_ArGH-_"

A shadow tendril coiled around Hiccup's wrist simultaneously and yanked him sharply aside. He stumbled at the force, heart hammering. There was more shadow in front of him now, a writhing mess that clawed and bound itself over the fallen man. Coils of it seized the stranger's wrists and ankles and fixed him tightly to the floor.

A stranger from Above...

An _awake_ stranger.

It couldn't have been planned, that much was clear from Jack's primal panic. Hiccup recognized him on the second glance - it was _him._ The one they had passed earlier, and the very same man that Jack had intended to find again. The son of the brother of the Chief. The _wimp._

His open eyes were the color of cloudy, moonless skies.

Jack stood over him, flipping his staff in one smooth motion so the narrow end rested beneath the man's softer chin. The opposite side of his staff wasn't blunt, Hiccup realized suddenly, but had been sharpened to a deadly point, as if Jack had taken the time to whittle the wood down for this very purpose. Hiccup had never noticed before, but then, he had rarely brought his staff in with him when they were playing. And besides, he had never thought it important-

Now he watched with detached fascination as the tip splintered over with frost until the sharpened end was like an icicle, gleaming and poised to fall.

"_Wait!_" the man babbled, and the babble quickly became a scream, high and shrill and cut off suddenly into a helpless "_mmmp!" as a length of shadow fixed itself tightly over his mouth. Jack's eyes glittered like tinsel, lips parted. Soaking in the fear. Then, unexpectedly, he threw the staff aside, and Hiccup was watching him straddle the man's chest and fix his hands around his throat instead.

"_Ssh._" he hissed. Hiccup could feel the rage within him, an endlessly growing storm.

"_Ssssh!_" Again. _Hatefully._ The man was struggling, screaming into his gag, and then Jack's hands were squeezing and the muffled sounds of him turned raw and frightfully desperate. Hiccup felt a phantom itch tingle around his own neck. He could recall quite suddenly the distant memory of Jack's hands singed around his throat, the pleased groans as Hiccup's lungs turned to fire, and the whispers afterward, _you did good, you did so good..._

Yeah, he recalled serenely. _That was nice._ It was odd, though, because Jack's hands weren't letting up on this man's throat the way they had with Hiccup's, and the pleasure he got from it seemed a

different thing entirely. He wasn't aroused at all, although his pulse was going fast. And he was certainly having fun. There was a tidal wave of fear upon the air, a thrash of primal panic that filled Hiccup's brain like a fog and fed Jack's growing glee.

More than his glee - this was vengeful, angry. His grin was a scimitar slash with with the fang teeth gritted tightly together. The right word popped unexpectedly into his head -

Hungry.

Starving.

And then the line of shadow peeled itself off the man's mouth, and sounds filled the air. He rasped and choked, fingers twitching uselessly through the bonds. But Hiccup could hear him in his head, screaming that way that he did before Jack stopped him, screaming and screaming and screaming. His face was very red, so red it was almost purple, and the darkness of his eyes beneath looked like moist drops of ink.

Hiccup leaned forward despite himself, drunk and swaying on the terror that gushed from him. He could see his face a little better now, even colored as it was. He had a wide jaw and very thick eyebrows. A few missing teeth. His hair was short and dark and stuck out everywhere at odd angles beneath a crooked helmet fitted with the horns of a ram.

And there was a light in his eyes, just a spark, like one of the white pin-prick stars in the sky.

It was actually very beautiful, that bit of light.

Hiccup watched it flicker and surge and twist and shine and finally fold into itself and fade completely.

The man stopped moving, but he was screaming still. The noise of it bounced around in Hiccup's head, rattling the inside of his skull and stinging the backs of his eyes like it was trying to burn it's way out. He wanted to dig his fingers in, create a new hole for it to escape through, or open his mouth and let it tear itself free like a bug bursting in a tangle of wings and legs from it's prison jar. But his mouth was closed, and his hands were out his sides, and still he was screaming, screaming, Hiccup didn't think he would ever stop screaming.

"Phew!" Jack whistled through his teeth, wringing out his hands. He sat back on the man's motionless chest, rubbing at the bones on one wrist, then the other. "Tough one! That's one way to do it, I guess, heheh...he's out now for sure."

"Out?" Hiccup echoed. His palms tingled, as if he was the one who had squeezed them tight around the man's throat, felt the blood pulsing quick and hard underneath his skin.

Jack rose slowly, stood over him for a moment, considering, and then stepped gracefully across his chest him to retrieve the fallen staff.

"Yeahhhh, you know. Out..." A loose gesture turned his hand as he searched for the proper words. "Out as in, out like a light. Out of

this world. Asleep."

But there's no dreamsand. His lips were numb, but perhaps they did move, because Jack seemed to understand his concerns just fine.

"Not everyone dreams with sand. Just the ones who have dreams you can change."

Right. Yeah, that made sense...the Nadder hadn't slept with dreamsand either, Hiccup thought. And neither had this man, back when they had first spotted him. But then, he had seen the Nadder's chest rising and falling after he had drugged it. Heard it's snoring, all the catching breaths. It was a large creature though, as Jack said. Of course it would sleep larger, too.

"Geez, he's really tuckered out too, poor guy..." Jack leaned on his staff, stretching out a bony leg to nudge the body playfully with his toe. "Earth to Viking! ...nahh, he's a goner, just look at him."

Hiccup couldn't _stop_ looking. There was a long, dark ring of bruises forming around his throat with a few liquid marks oozing the corners. Jack's nails must have done that - they weren't particularly sharp, but the rules all changed when you dug them in hard enough. He thought of those nails on his hips, scratching playfully down his thighs - sometimes they drew blood, he knew.

"He thought he could touch you!" Jack added, laughing. "What a joke!"

"Yeah." Hiccup mumbled. He felt a little woozy. The fear upon the air wasn't so thick now with it's source cut off, but as always, it was. A _lot_ to take in. Jack's brow raised, nose crinkling as he considered the scent upon the air. There was a new skip in his step when he bounded back to Hiccup's side.

"Not bad, eh? Boy, was he scared! _Petrified!_ I told you he was a wimp - did you see him freak when he saw your face-? You had an instant effect, Hic! A real nightmare!"

Hiccup couldn't see his body now. Jack was in the way. It calmed him, unintentionally, to have his vision filled with gray and blue rather than the bloody dark of the nameless stranger's throat. "...do you think...? I didn't do anything-"

"You were _frightening._" Jack bequeathed, white teeth gleaming in the dark.

The nourishment of fresh fear within him seemed to heighten everything. He was incredibly aware of his bare feet on the wooden floor, even the dust beneath his toes. Jack's eyes were lingering on his mouth, and a sense of yearning stirred within him at the meaning -

-it was good. It was fine. Everything was alright. They could go home, yeah...lay down again. And Jack could fuck his throat, and Hiccup could be greedy, take as much as he wanted. And before that - before that - he could...

Even the excitement that welled within him seemed more pronounced. It

really woke him up, drinking that man's fear.

The man in question was still on the floor, asleep, although that sense of screaming was beginning to ebb beneath Jack's distraction.

...he wasn't even snoring...

But then Jack's fingers were laced with his, tugging him into a shadowy corner, and Hiccup thought dreamily - _well, so what if he's not? He's out like a light, after all._

* * *

><p>When they returned, Toothless was still sleeping deeply. Hiccup caught the shape of him as they passed, curled up in his great inky mass outside one of the great hives. Nightmare sand had gathered above his head, twisting and turning into a definite figure, but before he could make out the exact shape they had rounded the corner and Toothless was gone.<p>

Jack tugged him by the wrists, laughing his musical laugh. His voice was like a yard of silk slipped around his shoulders, pulling him forward into the darkness of one of the hives. Fearling wisps scattered and fled into nothingness, scurrying like rats between their tripping feet.

There was a tunnel, and then a cave, and all inside glittered the faint, alien faces of ancient and rare stones. The floor was slippery, wet with melting drops of ice. Jack folded his legs beneath him and tugged Hiccup into his lap. His fingers found his throat, petting the bruises there fondly.

"You did well," he purred, and pressed a nail into a particularly sore spot. Hiccup gasped at the unexpected pressure on a still-sensitive bite, the sting of pleasure-pain that caught wordlessly in the back of his throat. The Prince chuckled, a pleased, throaty sound that shot through him like a drug. Hiccup could feel him already, pressed half-hard against his hip.

"Pitch was happy, too..."

The man with the ram horns lingered unnervingly inside his head. The bloodied marks of nails. The sounds of terror, of fighting to breathe.

...and, clouds...

He fit a hand to Jack's belly thoughtlessly, recalling their exact shape, their color. Blue-white, like the screaming man's eyes. But - no - blue-white like the clouds that Toothless guided them through, Hiccup corrected himself stubbornly. The dreamy ones, misty and cool against their skin. Pleasant.

"Last time we did this..." he began nervously.

Jack guided his hand lower and took his time fixing Hiccup's fingers one by one around the width of his cock. "Yeah~?"

"Last time we went Above, we...we both ended up..."

His arousal twitched at the mention. "...yeah_" Jack repeated, smokey and sinuous. "Tell me what you want, Hic..."

"I want..."

...and Jack had loved it. And Pitch had loved it. And they had all felt so very _perfect_, so smooth and flawless and entwined like individual threads in a greater design. Hiccup was so unpracticed with asking, but if he wanted it so badly, maybe, maybe Jack did, too...?

"Go on, sweetheart." Kisses. Pets. Fingers traced his ribs, his chest, circling over the place where his heart beat fast beneath the skin. "What do you want?"

Their hands met. Hiccup entwined their fingers together and leaned into him, drunk on the rush of his affection.

And breathed out at last, "...I want to fly..."

Jack's hands stilled. Hiccup felt suddenly as if he were stepping on ice of indeterminable thickness. His mouth opened, caught quickly on a plea, and before he could stop himself the words came rushing out to fill the space left by Jack's absence. "It was so _fun_, Jack. It was amazing! I thought I'd be nice if we...I, I want to do it again...I thought that you, t-that is, that *_I_*-"

"You want to _fly?_" Jack interrupted, the corner of his mouth quirking in a disbelieving smile, and Hiccup was relieved to hear the evenness of his tone, with just the slightest giggle layered beneath. Yeah, that made sense, he just - he hadn't expected such a specific answer.

"Well. Yeah." Hiccup wrung his hands out on his lap. "On Toothless?"

"...yeah." Jack said.

Hiccup grinned crookedly back. "...yeah?"

"Yeah...yeah. Sure."

"S-so, I. I can?"

Jack nodded faintly.

"Really? Right now...? Wow, _gods_, thank you...!" Hiccup leaned into him adoringly, squeezing his hands again and bending to kiss his knuckles, one by one, grinning between each peck. "You're _amazing_...!"

"Yeah..."

"_Thank you_, Jack!"

"Yeah..."

"I _love_ you..."

"Yeah, Okay. Okay..."

Hands slid lovingly over his face. The pad of his thumb stroked just beneath the socket of his left eye, grazing tenderly over the freckles across his cheekbone.

Hiccup hardly had time to breathe before the fingers dropped down and locked swiftly around his jaw, pivoting to shove him on his side with sudden, jarring violence.

Impact.

For a long minute there was nothing in his brain but the ringing in his ears and the electric surge of pain that rattled through his skull. Disorientation. Vague details. That was his temple that struck the stony ground, that was his teeth burning indentations into his tongue, that was liquid in his mouth - he couldn't seem to decipher if it tasted of sweat or iron. A coldness between his legs - Jack's hand grasping impatiently at his cock. He felt nothing through the white noise of his ringing head, nothing under his skin or in his brain or in his center, where their bond seemed to have vanished entirely. And then the hand balled into a fist and stroked him roughly, a impatient force nudging his thighs open for better access, and Hiccup thought, oh, and then aloud, "oh", and then Jack's mouth was sealed over his own and it all came tumbling back down his throat in reverse: oh, oh, oh.

He couldn't see. It wasn't the blame of shadow now; the world was a blur through the white-hot searing of his head, gauzy and muddled and popping with stars as if his vision had decided only to take him halfway. Blobs and drips surrounded him in various shades of gray. He thought he was choking - was that Jack's tongue, or his fingers? - or maybe he was gasping - it was so unusual, to be taken care of first - and-

"I'm getting you off." Jack hissed into his ear. "Moan."

Hiccup tried to moan.

Somewhere amongst that sea of gray, there had to be a face. He struggled to find it as his hands scratched and scrambled for something to hold on to. There were fingers inside him now. At least two; he could feel them stretching. It was habit that he followed, expectation which narrated what happened next as he swallowed the bitter taste that was rising in his throat: iron, copper, red.

Jack's fingers hooked and pulled apart, while the swollen head of his cock appeared to nudge in alongside them - focus, Hiccup thought, because this was important. This was the most important thing in the world. He could register the dry sting of him slotting in, the familiarity of it all, and then the world was going white again and it was all he could do it hold on to that word, focus, focus.

There was shame in there somewhere. He couldn't focus on Jack.

A pressure gripped beneath his knees, wrenching his legs up and apart until they were nearly folded back against his chest. Words were being spoken. He knew it because his Jack's breath was icy, and now

Hiccup's cheeks were icy too, and his nose. Jack's tone was watery, strange, and was he happy or angry? Was he in pleasure, or was he frustrated? He tried to move, but the position was overpowering and his body didn't want to cooperate, still disoriented and weak from the blow. It was the most he could do to try and clench his muscles, let his whimpering bleed from him the way Jack liked. He had no idea what the effect was. The thread within his center that usually tugged him along like a marionette seemed to have gone completely slack.

"_Look,_" Jack said, and there was a hand on his face, gripping at his jaw again. "At _me_-" His thumb dug into one cheek, his fingers the other, so that his mouth felt squished and forcibly pursed between them. Hiccup's vision was all liquid, but slowly two drops of blue appeared in the mist. He clung to them with all his might.

"Look at me," Over and over again. His awareness bled back slowly, centered by the sticking point of Jack's eyes. "_Look at me_" In time with his thrusts. The slapping sound of skin on skin were his exclamation points. Hiccup could feel him fuck in deep at the end of each breath, then jerk his hips back again, in, out, in. It didn't end until he could make out Jack's face in it's entirety, wild and disturbed and and threaded faintly with blue veins. He looked like a deity carved from ice, melting within him where they were joined. And then that beautiful face bent to bring their mouths together-

Relief flooded him. He could kiss back, now. The first sign of Jack's approval stirred within his core, as sweet and relishing as a breath of air. His hand fisted in his hair, jerked his head roughly back, and then Jack's teeth scraped over his throat again. Hiccup yelped when the points sank in hard enough to draw blood.

He could feel Jack's physical spend within him, the tight little groans that caught in his throat during orgasm. They filtered directly into his mouth, blotting out the wet pop of him tugging free again and replacing all his pained gasps with relieved sighs.

"It's okay." Hiccup gasped through the din. "I see you. I see you..." There it was, finally, the pressure of arms pulling him close. A hand cupped beneath his rear, hoisted him up like a child until Hiccup's legs were splayed around his waist. He tightened them in a clumsy hug and encircled his arms around his neck to match, clinging there as his master rose in an untidy line to his feet.

"I see you." Hiccup repeated with passion, now that he had the clarity to do so. "I _love_ you," he chanted, because Jack needed to hear it, and sure enough his heartbeat was starting to calm again. He tried helplessly to soothe him with pets of his fingers and graceless strokes of his palms, to imbue within his skin even a fracture of the adoration welling inside him.

A push sent them off into the air -

-and _ah_, he was _flying_. There was an airy way that only Jack flew, like he was coasting on the current of wind itself despite how dry and motionless the atmosphere within the Nightmare Realm remained. But he was flying - _flying_ - and Hiccup felt a dizzy joy begin to spread within him like a drop of spilled and spreading ink.

He buried his face into the cool nook of his shoulder when they touched ground again. It shook beneath them, unsteady, but he couldn't find the will to care. Now was the part where he climbed on Toothless, and soon would be the part where Jack was in the air with them, a blue-black shape silhouetted against the midnight sky...

Jack knelt down and pried Hiccup's arms from their coil around his throat. He loosened up with thoughtless obedience and found himself sitting abruptly on cold steel.

Hanging steel.

"...Jack?" he whispered, dazed. But Jack was halfway to the door, and it was only when the bars snapped shut behind him that Hiccup realized exactly where he was.

Hiccup could feel the whole fixture rock when he kicked off, swinging crookedly on it's metal chain.

The echo of the lock sliding into place.

Time was an amorphous thing in the Nightmare Realm, sliding and dripping like sand between his fingers. Hiccup took inventory slowly, deduced what he could from his throbbing temple, the raw ache in his lower back, and thought again, ...oh.

Funny.

It took as much time to return to his cage as it did to fall from it.

* * *

><p>Okay.<p>

Okay.

Okay.

* * *

><p>He started slow. Counting seconds. Every second he spent watching the door, and every beat that stretched on when Jack didn't return. He counted the pulse of his own heart, the twitch of his fingers against the steel. He counted until he lost count and he could only stare, replaying the last few ten-fifteen-twenty-forty minutes in his head and trying to figure out what it was that he done wrong.<p>

He had a different view than before. The cages here were spread out more sparsely, dotted about him like stars from a different galaxy. Hiccup knew enough of the Nightmare Realm to know he may never see its end, but he hadn't considered watching it through a filter again, not after Jack had been so giddy to show him what lay beyond his bars.

There was no ice in the distance. No dripping fixtures. No whines from passing Nightmares, or distant rumbles from Toothless. Nothing to feel, nothing to measure except the hollow sets of fearling eyes,

sleepy and shapeless within the murk.

Over time there were new specks of light popping up around him, yellow discs of wispy faces that blinked and whispered. Hiccup counted eyes instead of seconds and kept track on his fingers until he ran out of hands.

Toothless was asleep. He had to still be asleep. Four hundred and twenty three fearling eyes later, he still had to be asleep, and Hiccup was cold from his chest to the tips of his fingers.

He still couldn't feel Jack.

He counted grooves on the floor. Traced the notches in his fake leg. The metal always felt a few degrees cooler than his skin, and cooler still was the steel beneath his bare foot. Soon enough his head began to feel empty, as light and shapeless as the clouds. Maybe he was flying. Maybe he was dreaming. Maybe he had fallen asleep. It made as much sense as anything - he could never tell time, when he was asleep, and when he woke up things were always different.

He couldn't feel anything.

Hiccup closed his eyes.

When he opened them again, there was a clicking on the air, a different sound than the usual brittle snap of fearling teeth. "_Tsk, tsk..._"

There was a sound of shadow shifting, solidifying, and the graceful pad of another's feet behind him.

Hiccup didn't turn around. He wasn't ordered to. He stared tensely at the bars in front of him, listening to the slow thud of footsteps circling. The looming figure that appeared out of the corner of his right eye was fully upright with his hands clasped leisurely behind his back.

"Did the Canary miss his cage?" Pitch crooned sweetly.

This wasn't his cage. His cage had a hole in the top, with misshapen metal that looked twisted and scorched. And the scratches and faults in the aged surface were in the wrong spots. His cage had a tiny notch in the bar just below where the seam of the door lay, and a floor he had laid himself across too many times not to recognize intimately, and a-

"Show me your leg."

...right. Yes. Okay...

Hiccup watched his legs part for the Nightmare King with the same hollow thoughtlessness that he watched his nightmares unfold.

The motion was fluid, easy, a kind of seduction he had only just started to understand had a separate effect on Jack than the untidy way he usually rushed to offer himself. The effect on Pitch was more subtle. He tilted his head as if Hiccup were a particularly interesting display of art, his eyes scanning over every freckle and scar with a lazy entitlement that suggested the performance was being

evaluated.

"...your _leg._" He repeated at last. Each syllable was enunciated clearly, though the amusement still lingered through the touch of steel. "I only asked for the one."

A far-away memory skimmed coldly to the surface. He thought he might be shaking. At the very least, his knees were trembling when the right leg folded itself reluctantly inward, and as the left stretched itself out.

"There we are." The words came in an indulgent purr as Pitch knelt to place a hand over the seam where flesh turned to metal.

Please, Hiccup thought suddenly.

"My Fearling Prince was right, I think. It's not very pretty after all..."

"Please." He hadn't meant to interrupt. "_Please-_" He had no idea where this was coming from. His voice sounded brittle, like chips of splintered wood. They scratched and cut at the inside of his throat as he spoke. The Nightmare King flattened his hand, stroked it downward to where the screw attached the metal foot to it's post.

"Please, what?"

"I...I don't know..." His vision was beginning to liquefy, blotting Pitch's steady golden gaze. "_Please_, I'm, I'm _sorry-_"

"Sorry, for...?"

"I don't _know_...!"

Something was being done to his leg - Hiccup couldn't follow the process. He couldn't look. He thought he must be dreaming still, or that he had dreamed something like this before, but this was terror and it was primal and it was all he could do to try to think of Toothless, sweet, loyal Toothless in make-believe at his side.

There was the a drip in weight as the prosthetic was removed and gently set aside.

And then Pitch's hand appeared at his opposite knee and stroked in much the same way-

Hiccup couldn't stop the terrified sob that tore from him. He could hear himself gasping through the static: helpless, ugly sounds that tore through the air and heaved forcefully through his chest. It did no good to imagine Toothless anymore; Toothless wasn't here.

"Come now, child." The Nightmare King's voice was a velvet hush. That hand never left his right leg, drawing a pensive line around the same middle-point that his left had ended. The scythe of his smile was as white as his eyes. "What are you so _afraid_ of?"

Hiccup shook his head. His mind felt too full of panic, too empty of Toothless. A phrase popped hysterically into his mind - _'catch me'_ - and soon that was all he could think, over and over, as loud and

panicked as the screams of the Above men.

"I've not come to clip your wings."

catch me, catch me, catch me-

Pitch's eyes slid closed, lips slightly parted. Hiccup was drowning, and the Nightmare King was drinking him from the air. And then his hand eased up, finger by finger like a lover's parting caress, and Hiccup felt his right leg finally, _thankfully_ released, and left leg being scooped up again, lifted to rest against a stony knee.

"Not very pretty, no." he said again. A long, gray finger slid beneath Hiccup's chin, angling it upward to align their eyes. "And we can do better, can't we?"

A question. An answer. He forced a watery, tight-lipped nod. The skeletal finger slipped from his jaw to brush away a stray droplet that crawled down his cheek. There was a hiss of nightmare sand beneath them, but Pitch's eyes were locked on his, and Hiccup couldn't look away now even if he tried.

His left leg felt no different through whatever process Pitch was putting it through. His touch crept down, past the flesh and into the space where the prosthetic once was, and Hiccup only dared to glance down when Pitch saw fit to look himself.

The sight that greeted him stole the breath from his lungs.

There was a foot there. But it was couldn't _possibly_ be his. This was as black as tar, speckled with flecks of silver and violet. The nightmare sand was settling, smoothing itself over into tiny details: the shape of an ankle, individual toes. Tendrils of shadow twisted and curled around the outline, weaving themselves through languidly like threads guided by invisible needles. They darkened the phantom limb stripe by stripe, then folded themselves up over the flesh stump, higher and higher until they had passed over over his knee, his thigh. Hiccup watched in awe as the shade crawled up his lower half, swallowing first the entirety of one leg, then the other, and melding with his robe so perfectly that it was as if he had become a seamlessly shaded creature, whole.

"The shadow is yours." The Nightmare King directed, smoothing his hands over the shape of his new left foot. "The sand, mine. The shadow you can control if your will yourself to do so properly. Do you understand?"

He didn't, not entirely, but he forced himself to nod once more. The liquid on his face had stopped, drying fast against his tepid cheeks.

"Good. Try to move it."

Hiccup willed his toes to curl and saw them twitch only faintly. A few more attempts earned a proper flex. Pitch's finger traced an idle line up his calf as he worked, watching as he attempted to rotate his ankle - sluggish, yes, but it was easier by the second. The faint taste of the Nightmare King's silent praise urged him steadily on.

"You can stand, now."

Hiccup tried to stretch his toes apart separately, marveling at the natural way they curled in. It was dulled, but if he concentrated enough, he thought he could actually feel the limb as if it were an extension of himself resting against Pitch's lap. At the Nightmare King's gesture, he steadied his hands beneath him, wriggled himself back and pushed himself unsteadily to his feet. It took some flailing and waving of his hands, but he didn't fall. When he managed to straighten entirely, Pitch unfolded himself from his perch and loomed above him like a great towering God.

Standing on the new leg felt downright bizarre. He remained favoring his right side, but now the left seemed almost softened, like he was balancing on dead nerves. The idea of taking a step was impossible...but then Pitch opened his arms, and the gesture was obvious, come here.

Biting down his apprehension, Hiccup stretched out the shadow-leg, placed his weight blindly on top of it, and found it holding. The step maneuvered him into the space inside Pitch's open palms, which shifted to slide over his forearms and up to his shoulders, as if taking inventory of the small space he took up within the confinements of his cage.

"...very good..."

"Thank you..." Hiccup breathed, astonished. And then again, as the reality of what was happening hit him - the Nightmare King had given him a leg, a gesture he had never even fathomed was possible, let alone worth the effort on his behalf - it spilled from him in slavish adoration; "...t...thank you...!"

"...ah..."

The hand shifted from his shoulder to his hair, petting through the sweat-dampened leisurely. Drawing him closer. Hiccup curled himself gratefully into the Nightmare King's embrace, trembling.

"You like it, do you?" Pitch muttered kindly against his crown.

Hiccup could not even begin to imagine what he could have done to earn such a love.

"Yes." he relinquished in awe.

"Then come." The hand curved to close around his shoulders, sweeping him towards the barred door in one fluid motion. "You've better uses for it than sitting in cages."

* * *

><p>Toothless needed adjusting, too, but he was not approached alone. Hiccup did his best to untie the ropes that fastened the left stirrup in place, and Pitch dismantled and re-fastened and filled in the gaps with nightmare sand. He did not stay close, nor did he stay long. Once Toothless was fitted, he spared an indulgent smile and a long, thoughtful look over Hiccup's newly fixed body before vanishing

neatly into shadow.<p>

The metal bar that usually clicked in place around his prosthetic foot was fully replaced with a wispy-looking replica. The strap was wider, as delicate looking as the silk strands of a Nightmare's mane, and squeezed snugly around his instep when he slotted his foot into place at Toothless's side. It was a perfect fit, even better than the one he'd begun to grow used to.

Toothless wasn't quite so fond. Distrust had been clear in his expression when Pitch was sighted, and it took a long while of inspecting Hiccup for him to decide that the sand replica was harmless, even good for Hiccup. The adjustment on his own harness caused some fretting, but it worried him less so. Hiccup could feel the discord stirring within his mighty heart, that sense of missing something.

And it was funny, in a way, because now they weren't missing anything. If he looked down at himself, and both his legs cloaked tightly in threads of blackness, it was as if he had never lost that part of himself at all. He couldn't even spot the seam where the flesh ended and Pitch's sand began. The stunted feeling he could get used to, he was sure. Soon enough he might not even remember it was there.

After so many nights waking up to the sight of a mangled limb, the thought of forgetting his own defect was astounding.

For Toothless, it was just confusing. He couldn't seem to make up his mind about where his eyes were supposed to rest; Hiccup's leg, or Hiccup's face. The air was full of rumbling huffs, moody sighs, claws pawing uncertainly at stone. Hiccup hands appeared, small and gray where they were cupped around Toothless's strong face. "You're gonna love this," he promised, and looked straight into those green-gold eyes as he spoke.

Toothless gaze flattened, unamused. An indignant once-over was given, from his chin down to his perfect, newly matched feet. Hiccup wiggled his toes hopefully, and Toothless tapped his claws in reply - "There you go, see?" Hiccup laughed. "It's good, bud."

It was good...but good or bad didn't seem to be the problem. By his dragon's fragmented attention, and that pull at his heart, in his center where Toothless was firmly at home, he knew that there was more to it than that...

...what, exactly? Hiccup wondered.

And then, a voice upon the air, as sharp and strong as cracking ice; "Ooooh...fancy!"

Hiccup swiveled to find the source. And there, high above him and perched with animal grace against a hanging cage, was his master. The soles of his feet were balanced against the bars, the crook of his staff looped around one for balance. He was perfectly inhuman with his head tilted curiously and frost thickening where his bare skin touched, while the cage itself looked positively frigid, half-white and covered in glittering ferns.

"What's up with the lizard?" Jack lifted his chin.

"N-nothing." he faltered. Toothless grumbled back sourly, as if to underline the statement. "Nothing- he, ah...he's not fond of change." Hiccup gave a half smile, flattening his hand over Toothless's scales, and gave in as his dragon nudged his cheek, croaking a note of amusement. "Am I right, Toothless?" he mumbled, turning into his friend's advances with easy affection. "Right...? You don't like surprises, do you bud?"

"What's not to like?" Jack scoffed. "Call me old-fashioned but I don't see what's so _fun_ about walking around with a chunk of you ripped off..." There was a loud screech of rusted metal as he pushed off the cage. Toothless's ears flicked, squinting irritably at the source. When Jack landed on the ground beside them, one leg already kicked in a lazy, pacing step, he rolled one wing out in an unconcerned stretch, nearly clipping a shoulder in the process.

Jack snickered and fixed his sights low.

"...look at you..." he muttered under his breath. "...I told you he loved you. It's been, what, five years? And he's already spoiling you rotten. Pitch never gave _me_ any free limbs..."

Hiccup's mouth quirked. The Fearling Prince cackled and stretched out a foot pointedly to demonstrate. "It's a joke get it?" he teased. "I already _got_ all ten of my toes."

"I..." Hiccup began, smiling crookedly. And then; "...yes." Something seemed _off_ in the air. Not _bad_, but just...off. As if there was a note hanging between them, but the words were all blurry, scrambled and re-scrambled into something incomprehensible.

"You're still dragging on one side." A hard _snap_ of his fingers- "That's right! You're not good with nightmare sand, are you? I'm no Pitch, but I've got a _bit_ of a grip on it-"

Another _snap_, and Hiccup felt his left leg give a violent jerk. It was as if an invisible hand had fixed itself around his ankle and pulled it sharply back. He stumbled with a loud, undignified yelp, flailing to right himself.

Both the Prince and Toothless moved very suddenly and with astonishing speed. It was premeditation that caused Jack to catch him first. His arms closed around his waist, catching him before he could lose balance entirely and tugging their bodies flush together at the hip.

"_There_ we go." he purred.

Toothless nudged his head roughly between them and _growled._ Hiccup could feel his heart going very fast, his own surprise combined with Toothless, and the dragon's sense of insulted fury rattling through him in a bizarre aftershock. It was almost like drinking someone else's fear, the way his friend's vexation lay alien and impossible to understand within his stomach. Jack was only playing, but Toothless was bristling, his fangs very clearly on display. _It's fine_, Hiccup willed him to understand, and a hand reached out and stroked the smooth, scaled cheek. Toothless leaned into his hand automatically, then quickly flicked his head away, looking at Jack with such rapt attention that it was as if he expected something to

shatter. _

Jack, if anything, only seemed smug about it. One hand encircled more firmly over Hiccup's midsection, holding them together in a snug fit while the other brushed back his hair tenderly.

Caught his chin between two fingers.

"What's wrong, dollface? You're shaking like a leaf."

"It's okay." Hiccup said, more so to Toothless than Jack. "Everything's okay." And then; "Minor faults in balance...s-something to get used to. I've got two left feet anyway."

"_Hah_," Jack sputtered. And then louder, louder, until he was hitching with the force of his giggling. "...there it is! _There's_ that deadpan. I missed you talking!" He leaned in suddenly and captured their open mouths together, swallowing Hiccup's startled noise before it could form completely and turning it to a pleased, blissful sigh. When he pulled back, Hiccup's lips were already parted, leaning in for more. Jack nuzzled their cheeks together once before tucking his face into the hollow of Hiccup's throat like a burrowing child. His next words were uttered out in a chill fog that ghosted over the bruises there.

"I'm so glad you're _back._"

That tone was so beautiful. So forgiving. A solemn and frightful question lay unspoken between them, but perhaps he didn't need the answer after all. He could feel Jack's happiness in the air, feel the barely contained energy coursing through him, as if he were a broiling storm trapped within a boy's body, turning from the inside out.

He was aware of a space within him. A need for something. Air, clouds...whatever it was, Jack seemed to sense it, too.

"It's nap time." he muttered. "For the Night Fury."

Hiccup hesitated.

"Go on."

"Toothless." he said, and Toothless gave him a hollow, hollow look. "Go on," Hiccup said, and Jack was happy, and he was happy, so he smiled serenely and with all of his heart. He didn't want to drug him, as Jack seemed to be implying. He wouldn't, anyway, there was no need. Toothless would understand - "Go on," Hiccup said again, a soft and reassuring purr. "I'll join you in a minute."

Jack's hand inched lower, rubbing over the firm curve of his backside. Toothless nipped at the air for a moment, searching for fear - _anyone's_ fear - and Hiccup knew, suddenly, that for whatever reason, he expected to taste Hiccup's.

He didn't, of course.

Hiccup wasn't scared.

The dragon purred softly, gave them a wilting, tired look, and shook

out his head and wings. Hiccup watched him slink away with the air of a world-weary parent. Jack waited until he had gone into the shadow, silent and mostly still besides the faintest squeeze of his hand. When he spoke again, his tone was low and sweet: "What do you want, Hic...?"

Hiccup stared into the darkness beyond them. The side of his head tingled, a dull and persistent ache from where Jack had struck it against the stone floor.

"What do you want?" he whispered back. Jack's lips stretched into a smile against his throat. And then he pulled back, and his beautiful face was all he could see. The touch of his hands was all he could feel.

"I love you." Jack promised, and pushed him to his knees.

* * *

><p>Pitch said, if he was good, he could ride Toothless outside of the Nightmare Realm, in the star-studded velvet of the midnight sky where there was enough space to soar, enough oxygen to toss fire petals into the audience of clouds, and so much of Toothless's pure, perfect joy burning through his veins that Hiccup could free-fall from a hundred feet in the air and never fear that Toothless would fail to keep him from hitting the ground.<p>

So Hiccup was good. And Jack loved him with so much passion and fervor that Hiccup felt he was held in the arms of a hurricane. Pitch's affection, that once-believed believed dull and decaying thing that Jack promised to him under the moon, remained a steady and unwavering current beneath him that the Prince called over and over again 'love' until Hiccup could not help but think it him. When he stepped on his left side, his leg did not crumble. When he flew on Toothless's back, they remained perfectly joined at the stirrup.

What else could that be but love?

Time passed as a dream, measurable by the spells of sleep, the blessings of Jack's kisses, and the lovely nights beneath the moon's face when Hiccup tried to reach up and up to touch the sky. And all the while there was the constant fixed points Toothless's purr, Toothless's heart, Toothless's eyes peering worriedly into his whenever he woke in fits, passing back to him the reflection of his own unbroken self until the lingering dregs of fear became safe and meaningless again.

He learned tastes of every kind. Gold-turned-black dreams of swallowing silver, of missing limbs (how his head hurt, and his leg tingled, that memory of fire,) dreams of bodies with dragon's fang skewered through, or dragon bodies impaled with knives ('I didn't mean to,' sobbed a man in his sleep, and Pitch had smiled and twisted his fingers until the mass of nightmare sand was enough to swallow him whole.) There were dreaming designs of fire and ice, empty beds that were meant to be full and beds full of strangers that were meant to be empty. Hiccup drank when he could. Watched when he couldn't. Sucking his fingers became a comforting habit, something to take his mind away from the hunger when it began to gnaw at his insides again.

That was the thing about hunger, he found. Sometimes you just didn't know you were hungry until you got the next taste. And then it happened all over again, the withdrawal, the pains. The need to fill his mouth with something, anything, to keep his tongue busy and his stomach full. Jack was happy to provide, to overfill him until he was numb and spent and thoroughly remade, and between turns he always chanted into his ear, '_good, so good--'

It was a feeding of it's own, that praise.

Hiccup gorged himself on it.

For some time in the world of Above, there were reoccurring nightmares of the man with the ram horns. Hiccup saw them repeatedly over the head of his father, the brother of the Chief. He dreamed of his son, born again in black sand and unraveling slowly from the wounds at his throat. Sometimes there was a person over him, squeezing him by the neck until he stopped moving. The shape of the person changed from week to week - one night it was a man, the other a woman. Sometimes the figure attacking wore Viking horns, other capes, and others still carried axes or swords or came fitted with wartime words from foreign lands and motivations Hiccup could not understand.

Sometimes they were cold figures, jagged and dripping as if sculpted from ice. Reputation was what Jack called those. He heard the whispers from the ones that woke in the thralls between terrors, frost giants, they'd say, or the deathly cold. Sometimes they said Jokul Frosti, and Jack would wait until they tore from their sheets sweating and gasping in the grip of night terrors, to allow a second's glimpse of his face.

Hiccup came across the blonde woman once - still his favorite, and perhaps always so - who cried in her sleep, 'Hiccup.' And again, louder, 'Hiccup!' until Jack had announced that they had taken their fill and lead him with a satisfied grin from her room.

He whispered it into her ear on other nights - 'Hiccup' - and those were nights when neither of them ever had to touch the golden sand to turn it black. It rotted on it's own, spurred on by whatever thread she had come to understand his name by.

There was one visit where he watched, in a beautiful and spacious room they had only visited once, Jack pulling his favorite trick in which he wore shadow like new skin. This time it was a very small shadow, gangly and straw-haired missing it's left leg just below the knee. The man asleep in his bed was large and grand and very old, with graying hair in an untamable beard that was once the color of fire.

Jack cried with a mockery of his voice, listen, please, for once in your life, just listen to me, and in his sleep the man sobbed back, Odin, and no, and I'm sorry, so sorry, so very, very sorry.

Hiccup had watched until his vision turned to water, and his breath became short and clipped and frayed at the edges, and then Jack had taken him outside where he had wailed long and hard, unable to stop the moisture that dripped steadily down his cheeks - and it was

strange, so strange, and why was he leaking like that...?

On and on it continued, until Pitch fetched Toothless, and then they were in the sky where the rush of wind dried up the salt on his cheeks, and Hiccup thought, _wow_, and laughed, "_amazing!_" and was pathetically grateful to be loved enough that he was granted such a privilege.

He had many ways to show his gratitude. And he did.

Again and again, he did.

They were spotted now and again. Often Pitch tangled nightmare sand above their head and watched them fall. Sometimes Jack plucked them up, tossed them back in their beds. Other nights he just left them there, sprawled across the floor like creatures long gone.

The whispers became blacker: _monster, ghost._

One woman screamed, and Jack silenced her with the sharp end of his staff. Red bubbled up from where he forced the point down through her skin. Out like a light. Sleeping. The stars in her eyes were very bright, but they burned out so quickly that Hiccup hardly had time to watch them fade.

The whispers became blacker still: _killer, curse._

(Hiccup whispered to him too, sweetly into the shell of his ear as Jack took icy shelter in the warmth of his thighs: _master, savior, prince._)

There was a night where he did not eat at all, and Jack returned again and again to the bed of the brother of the Chief. And Pitch had watched the doors, and nodded, and said, _'are you hungry?_' and then, _'very hungry?_' and finally, _'you are capable of more, I think.'_ He watched Jack close the doors, and rouse the man awake with the sound of his wife's gurgling voice, and all the while Hiccup stood where he was told to stand, at the corner of his bed where Pitch could observe him clearly from the dark.

He had not expected him to wake so suddenly. But by the time his eyes had opened, Jack had sealed bands of shadow over his wrists, his ankles, and he was held too tight for his initial thrashing to do any good.

His eyes met Hiccup's, and there was a light in them, burning strong and overflowing with fear. Hiccup had never looked for so long into one of the Above men's eyes for so long. He wanted to hide, but Jack had said, _stay_, and he wanted to freeze, but Pitch had said, _go on._

The man opened his mouth and took a breath to shout. Hiccup threw his hands in up in a hurry and babbled over him - "No, no, nononono, _stop_" It all came out in a rush, the syllables tripping and tangling over each other in their haste. "Don't do that - it's, it's okay! I'm not gonna hurt you-"

Shadow crawled over his chin, the black beard shot through with gray, and threatened to gag his soundlessly screaming mouth.

"It's okay. It's okay-" His hands came down, hovered over his face, and Hiccup could feel his terror. Terror, and something else. Reputation. Recognition. It was as if he knew his face.

"_Hiccup_," he rasped.

And Hiccup said, "I'm here. I'm here..."

Pitch was watching him very closely. His hands, most of all. He called his power 'paralysis,' and Hiccup understood what that meant. It meant stillness, and calm. It meant sleeping soundly. It meant peace. Hiccup pressed his hands to the man's heaving chest, trembling with his need to take his terror away.

It was the thing with hunger. It was always the thing with hunger. He never knew he was hungry until he was _hungry_, and gods, he was. He was so, _so_, hungry.

The man tried again to struggle, but his movements were sluggish and weak. "There you go," Hiccup rambled on, "Relax...you're safe..." He could hear his heart beating fast in his ears. _Safe, safe,_ it had such a meaning to him. He wished this stranger could understand it as well as he did. "Everything's going to be alright..."

"Gods, no," croaked the man. His voice came out reedy, strained. Hiccup brushed his hair back from his forehead with trembling fingers, a gesture he himself found comfort in. It was difficult to tell his effect on the man. The fear was like a bad dream, like seeing a ghost, and every sorrowful thought of missing family and ravenous seas seemed to have vanished entirely in the spell of it.

"I'm gonna help you, okay?" he swore, and it was almost as if Pitch and Jack had vanished entirely. "I'm helping you, I promise...it's nothing. It's only fear."

Only fear.

"What - what's something you like...? Think of something you like..." A memory popped into his head - gold dreamsand, a boat. "Sailing?" the word came naturally, forming itself unexpectedly on his tongue. The only indication that he was correct was the spark of recognition that lit up the man's terrified face.

"Sailing, that's it!" Hiccup encouraged him. "That's good! Think of sailing..."

"You can't-" the man gasped. The paralysis was setting in. The way he moved his lips, it was as if he was struggling to form the words. "_Devil_, you can't, can't _be_-"

"And the sea." Hiccup continued gently. "And the, the wind in your hair, the salt." There was saliva gathering in the fold of his tongue, an empty pit in the very center of his stomach. He thought he had taken his fill when Jack put this man's son to sleep, or had understood his terror when he had seen Jack draw it out of him time and time again. Now he knew what the difference was. Being the focal point, the only one drawing fear from him, and so closely, so _intimately_, it was a direct feeding that removed every possible filter. The man shook his head once, twice, fear spilling in a

frothing rush from his eyes and his mouth and his heaving chest, and Hiccup shushed him and soothed him and felt that empty pit within him slowly fill to the brim.

His hand circled over once, twice, tracing the outline of his heart. It was skipping beneath him in uneven and rapidly weakening beats. Hiccup thought of falling through fire, black wings in the distance, a hand on his own chest, pushing through. His fingers seemed to darken with the memory.

"Can't," the man said again. "Can't, can't..." His fingers were twitching, closing and flexing as if trying to will a weapon into his hands. To fight. His pride was a worn and weary thing, but still fierce, still strong.

"Sssh." The dark fingers rested against his skin, just enough to push the suggestion in. Sleep, Hiccup thought, please be still. Paralysis soaked him to the bone, relaxing his muscles, dragging in deep until his breathing began to slow.

His heartbeat, even slower.

"...a..h..."

"Sssh..."

"..."

"That's it, it's okay, it's okay..."

There was only a little of that beautiful light left in his eyes, and it was fading fast. His fear was so heady - Hiccup's mind sorted itself through, supplying a name to the experience. Green apples, he thought out of the blue, so tart that they made your mouth tingle. And overripe blackberries, the kind that burst in your mouth when you chewed. The flavor stayed long after the pulse became a crawl, slower and slower until it was ready to stop entirely. He drew his fingers away, but the stillness of his touch stayed inside, calming the trembling mouth and sliding the heavy eyes gently shut.

Beneath Jack's bindings, his hands went slack.

No dreamsand came to greet him. He was as perfectly motionless, as pale as his son had been. Very deep under, then. Hiccup released him slowly, patting his hair back one more time in a silent thank-you, and silently hoped that where ever he was, he was dreaming in gold.

The Nightmare King crossed silently to his right, the Fearling Prince on his left. Hiccup straightened slowly and with a grace he hadn't meant to employ. He understood, distantly and with a finality that calmed him, exactly why Jack basked in fear that way that he did. It made him feel stronger, less like a shadow and more like a real thing. And thought he might be real now, standing there, looking down at the peaceful quiet of the slumbering stranger at his feet. Not just a shade, but real, with his masters there to want him, and his fear there to staple his wilting insides into one piece.

Pitch's hand curved over the nape of his neck, Jack's fitting with natural into the small of his back. And inside, he was so complete.

So sated. He hadn't known it was possible to feel so completely alive.

Full to bursting, just as Jack had promised.

"Well?" Pitch prompted. His fingers rested lazily, cupping the side of his throat so that his cracked nails lay perfect within the ring of bruises Jack's teeth had made. Hiccup opened his mouth and closed it once, savoring the taste as it lingered, ripe and sweet and filed away into some secret, greedy compartment beneath his tongue.

"Delicious." he said.

* * *

><p>(Stop.)

* * *

><p>That night, Hiccup dreamed of joy.<p>

He was on his back, and Jack's hands were around his throat, and in this vision Hiccup was watching it all out of body and from a distance. Watching Jack's fingers squeeze and let up, squeeze and let up, and the twitch of his hips working between his spread legs. His shoulders and back were obscuring his expression, so Hiccup drew himself to stand and padded over through the dreamspace, sat himself down beside his head and watched the nightmare-replica of his own face tremble and gape.

Sure enough, when he looked closely, he found a light buried within the acid drops of his eyes, just as he had with the ram-horned man and his father. They were two perfect, far-away stars that shone and glittered whenever he sucked in another breath of air. But in his dream, these stars faded slowly. They were bright at first, brilliantly so, but one gasp of air later they were dimmer, and the next even dimmer, and then finally Jack was mewling and hissing and coming deep inside him and Hiccup was watching that dying candle light in his eyes flicker and writhe through the pinch of white fingers until it was finally and firmly snuffed out.

He watched Jack pull out and rise, naked, to stand above his body. His grin was a bright, airy loop of a thing laying crooked on his face as if hanging from fixed nails. Hiccup felt love in his heart and liquid on his face and smoke pouring from his eyes were the candles had been extinguished. It drifted from his cheeks and above his head in white-gray plumes, gathering in a cloud of drifting smog at the ceiling of his old cage.

He woke trembling in Toothless's wing and feeling very much like he had fallen from a very far distance.

As always, when waking in the Nightmare Realm, it took a minute to remember exactly where he was.

When the pieces clicked back together, Hiccup took inventory. He felt soaked to the bone. Wetness inside him, in the pounding of his own blood crawling through his veins. Wetness beneath him, in the sticky pool of sweat and shadow and the traces that Jack left behind. A

swipe of his fingers over the granite floor turned up nothing, no chalky human outline for him to fit himself into. No cracked and bleeding insides. No sea of red.

And he thought, inexplicably, `_did I fall?` I could have sworn I fell..._

But it was impossible; Toothless was here. Toothless caught him.

`_Go back to sleep_`, whispered a buzz in the back of his brain.

Hiccup tucked himself back into his nest of shadow and secured Toothless's leathery wing firmly around his shoulders again. His head fit perfectly against his dragon's breast, a special bed meant just for him. He could hear the song of his heartbeat magnified against his ear, a drum beat to the din of the Nightmare Realm that soothed his restless pulse and evened the tangles of his catching breath.

...and he had a feeling he had `_dreamt_` something just now, something chilling and strange and `_important_`, but one way or another he couldn't seem to recall exactly what that was.

Hiccup closed his eyes and let himself fall, wrapped in Toothless's indestructible embrace. He did not hit the ground, and he did not dream.

End
file.